

'The reality I speak of here...'

A LONG ANALYSIS
OF **WOODY ALLEN**'S SHORT FICTION

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ

AMELIA PRECUP

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**A Long Analysis
of Woody Allen’s Short Fiction**

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ

2023

Referenți științifici:

Prof. univ. dr. Michaela Mudure

Lect. univ. dr. Petronia Popa-Petrar

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**Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai
Presa Universitară Clujeană
Director: Codruța Săcelean
Str. Hasdeu nr. 51
400371 Cluj-Napoca, România
Tel./fax: (+40)-264-597.401
E-mail: editura@ubbcluj.ro
<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro>**

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Introduction

“The reality I speak of here is the same one Hobbes described, but a little smaller”¹, writes Woody Allen between parentheses in “My Philosophy”, a text first published in *The New Yorker*, in the early years of his collaboration with the magazine.² This sentence, through its insertion in a mock-philosophical essay presenting itself as a writer’s manifesto and through its explanatory potential marked by the brackets, invites an extrapolative reading that can encompass Woody Allen’s entire prose work. Therefore, the case can be made that the reality of Allen’s short fiction presents the world as bodies in motion governed by the fear-desire principle, the soul as mortal,³ the individual caught in theological conundrums and struggling in a life that is “solitary, poor, nasty, and short”⁴ – of course, on a smaller scale, ironically deflated by self-mockery and metafictional gestures. This view of the world becomes the working principle of Woody Allen’s world construction strategies and constitutes the ethos underlying his entire fiction. But that’s not all there is to it. If we keep with the

¹ Woody Allen. *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*. New York: Wings Books, 1991, 171.

² “My Philosophy” appeared in December 19, 1969.

³ For a complex discussion of Hobbes’s understanding of the soul see David Johnston. “Hobbes’s Mortalism.” *History of Political Thought* 10.4 (1989): 647–63 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44797163>.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*, Touchstone, 1997, 78.

extrapolating exercise initiated above, this sentence also reflects the cultural forces that have influenced Allen’s writing since the beginning of his career: *The New Yorker* school of fiction, postmodernism, and Jewish culture. It presupposes a certain degree of erudition from the reader, as much of the fiction published in *The New Yorker* does; it gestures playfully and self-reflexively towards the very act of writing, a technique typical of postmodernist writing; and it reflects the self-belittling tendencies characteristic of the tradition of Jewish humor. It also legitimizes an extensive exploration of all of the above, which is precisely what this work intends to do.⁵

⁵ Some sections of this book appeared in previously published articles. See “Jewish Humor and Woody Allen’s Short Fiction”, *Studies in American Humor*, Penn State University Press, 3.2 (2017): 204-222; “‘If only God would give me some clear sign!’ – God, Religion, and Morality in Woody Allen’s Short Fiction”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 14.40 (2015): 131-149; “The Recipe for ‘sheer dessert’ – Woody Allen’s Short Stories for *The New Yorker*.” *Philobiblon*. XIX.2 (2014): 501-517; “Bovarism and Consumerism in Woody Allen’s ‘The Kugelmass Episode’”, *Studia UBB, Philologia*, LVIII.3 (2013): 193-202; “The Manipulation of World-Building Conventions in Woody Allen’s Short Fiction”, *Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World*, Editura Universității din Oradea, 2015, 127-137; “American Manhood Reinvented. Schlemielhood and the Predicaments of Modern Man in Woody Allen’s Short Fiction”, *Constructions of Identity (VII)*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, 343-359; “The Romantic Paradigm in Woody Allen’s Short Fiction,” *Conferința internațională „Doctoratul: o carieră atractivă în cercetare,”* Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013, 170-183; „Fetișism intelectual și spirit victorian in *Târfa din Mensa* de Woody Allen”, *De la victorianism la postmodernism*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2013, 145-157; “The Rethinking of the Past and the Perpetual Present in Woody Allen’s Fiction”, *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity*. Vol. III, Tîrgu Mureș: “Petru Maior” University Press, 2014, 818-825; „Anii '60 prin monoculul domnului Eustace Tilley”, *Vatra*, Nr. 11-12, Târgu-Mureș, 2012, pp. 116 – 122.

Woody Allen is one of the most prolific artists of the twentieth century. He is an acclaimed director and scriptwriter, a successful actor, a dedicated clarinetist,⁶ an appreciated playwright, and an awarded short fiction writer. His entire work testifies to the efforts he has put into creating an easily identifiable style, which never fails to provoke laughter, and into the creation of a remarkable fictional persona, the Jewish New Yorker, the neurotic eccentric, constantly obsessing about love, art, death, the existence of God, the fate of the universe, and the meaning of life. These have become the hallmark of Allen's work and have always proven "capable of drawing considerable recognition and identification"⁷ from his target audience.

Most of the studies on Woody Allen's work focus on his films, analyzing various aspects from plot, technique, influences, and characters, to his comic power and ideological perspectives, while his short fiction has received little critical attention. Allen's short stories are generally discussed in books dedicated to his films, but there are no extensive critical studies to explore this area of his work. Although not as well-known as his films, Woody Allen's short fiction represents a significant part of his work and, speculative as it may seem, Jay Parini's claim that "[i]f Woody Allen had never written plays like *Play It Again, Sam* or screenplays like *Annie Hall*, his prose pieces would be enough to establish his

⁶ On the evening of March 28, 1978 when he won the first three Academy Awards of his career for *Annie Hall*, he did not attend the awards ceremony because he had to play the clarinet with the New Orleans Funeral and Ragtime Orchestra at Michael's Pub in Manhattan. His explanation was: "I couldn't let down the guys." See Stephen J. Spignesi. *The Woody Allen Companion*. London: Plexus, 1994, 32.

⁷ Sam B. Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen*. 2nd Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1.

reputation as a significant humorist in the American canon”⁸ is easy to defend.

Woody Allen’s career as a short story writer has been shadowed by the overwhelming success of his cinematic work. Nevertheless, he started as a writer and he has continued to write short pieces over the years. Although not as widely applauded as his film work, his contribution to the American short story tradition is indeed considerable, as will hopefully be demonstrated in the following pages. The watershed moment of his writing career is the year 1966, when he had his first piece accepted for publication in *The New Yorker*. It was the “The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers,” a text that reads like a hostile epistolary exchange between two people who play chess via mail and end up engaging in a petty quarrel, by which Allen lampoons academic solipsism. *Playboy* had solicited him a text, but Allen sent it to *The New Yorker*.

Being published by *The New Yorker* represented one of the most important recognitions a short story writer could receive. As Woody Allen confessed, “[t]o me, as of everyone else of my generation, *The New Yorker* was hallowed ground. [...] I was shocked when I got this phone call back saying that if I’d make a few changes, they’d print it.”⁹ Woody Allen became a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* until 1980 when he decided to stop writing short fiction and channel all his creative energies into his films. After a twenty-year break, Allen resumed his collaboration with *The New Yorker* by submitting another piece, “Attention

⁸ Jay Parini (ed.). *American Writers. Supplement XV: Woody Allen to C.D. Dwight*. New York: Cengage Gale, 2006, 14.

⁹ Allen quoted in Yagoda, Ben. *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. London: Duckworth, 2000, 368.

Geniuses: Cash Only", which was published on February 21, 2000. He has been regularly contributing short stories or casual pieces to this magazine ever since. The aesthetic direction of *The New Yorker* short story and the editorial recommendations of the magazine have had a considerable impact on Woody Allen's writing and have shaped it in a very specific manner. While most of Woody Allen's short pieces appeared for the first time in *The New Yorker*, he also contributed to *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *Evergreen Review*, *New Republic*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Daily News*.

Woody Allen's short stories and sketches have been collected in four short story collections, all of them first published by Random House. The first one, *Getting Even*, appeared in 1971 and includes short stories written between 1966 and 1971. *Without Feathers* followed in 1975 and gathered texts published from 1972 until 1975, and *Side Effects* came out in 1980. These first three volumes have been subsequently reprinted into a joint edition entitled *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, published by Wings Books in 1991.¹⁰ The combined edition was also published in Great Britain by Picador in 1992 and reprinted in 1998. In 2007 Random House issued a compilation of short stories previously published in *Getting Even*, *Without Feathers*, *Side Effects*, under the suggestive title *The Insanity Defense. The Complete Prose*, but some texts have been left out, despite the title of this edition. *Mere Anarchy* is Woody Allen's latest short stories volume and was published by Random House Group in 2008. The collection gathers texts written after 2000, when Allen resumed his collaboration with *The New Yorker*.

Allen's short stories, essays, and casual pieces excel as exercises in splicing high and low culture and range from

¹⁰ All the references in this book to Woody Allen's short stories written before 1980 are to this edition, unless specified otherwise.

parodical philosophical essays to mock-historiographic, mock-journalistic, and surrealistic pieces, to parodical reinterpretations of hardboiled fiction and other formula fiction types. Woody Allen's short fiction is configured as a densely comic exploration of the laden existential concerns that trouble the neurotic urban self. It revolves around the absurdity of life and the decadent self-absorption of modern man, the miasmic awareness of mortality and the subtle perversion of religion, the intractability of romantic relationships, sexuality, morality, and obsessive psychological pain. His stories are told in one of the most celebrated twentieth-century comic dialects – a dialect originating in Jewish humor, modernized by the syntax of standup comedy, and urbanized by the comic tradition of *The New Yorker*. His lively and intense literary style aligns his writing with the tradition of famous American comedians and humorous writers with whom "Jewish angst, Freud, literacy, irony, and sex were ushered into the discourse of mainstream comedy"¹¹. Allen is part of the Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman lineage that founded and consolidated the comic tradition of *The New Yorker*, and he enriches this tradition by exposing it to the aesthetic exuberance of literary postmodernism.

While the impressive array of film awards is often considered his greatest achievement, Woody Allen's literary skills have also been awarded. One of his best-known short stories, "The Kugelmass Episode", published for the first time in *The New Yorker* on May 2, 1977, brought him the O. Henry Award for Best Short Story in 1978. This award indicates the exceptional merits of his short story and constitutes an important critical recognition of his talent as a short story writer. It places Woody Allen among writers who have made remarkable contributions to the American short

¹¹ John Lahr. *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001, 269.

story tradition, such as William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Irvin Shaw, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, Eudora Welty, Bernard Malamud, John Cheever, Cynthia Ozick, or Saul Bellow. Moreover, several of Woody Allen's short stories have been anthologized in well-known editions¹², relevant to the understanding of the American short story.

Critical references to Woody Allen's short fiction started to appear years after his debut as a short story writer in the pages of *The New Yorker*, but this part of his work remains surprisingly unattended by critics worldwide. In volumes dedicated to Allen's work, his prose is generally treated as a footnote to his filmography. There is no extensive research dedicated exclusively to Woody Allen's short fiction, and the majority of researchers who do examine it tend to channel their efforts towards the investigation of Allen's humorous devices.

In one of the earliest studies on Allen's work, *Woody Allen: Clown Prince of American Humor*, Bill Adler and Jerry Feinman¹³ dedicate a section to Woody Allen's writing style. The great merit of their work is that it explores Allen's humorous devices and

¹² See, for instance, *Jewish American Literature. A Norton Anthology*, edited by, Jules Chametzky et al.; the seventh and the eight editions of *The Norton Reader*; *Jewish American Stories* edited by Irving Howe, to name just a few. Woody Allen's work is also mentioned in the *Encyclopedia of Jewish-American Literature* edited by Gloria L. Cronin and Alan L. Berger, but the article dedicated to his achievements focuses on his filmography and includes only a few lines dedicated to his short stories. A slightly more substantial, although brief, presentation of Woody Allen's short fiction is to be found in *American Writers. Supplement XV: Woody Allen to C.D. Dwight*, edited by Jay Parini, where Allen's prose is briefly surveyed and considered together with his plays.

¹³ Bill Adler and Jerry Feinman. *Woody Allen: Clown Prince of American Humor*. New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975.

establishes a lineage with the tradition of the American stand-up comedy and with the most influential comic writers of *The New Yorker*, the magazine where Woody Allen has published most of his texts. Still, Adler and Feinman do not concentrate exclusively on Woody Allen's fiction, nor do they accomplish a rigorous academic, in-depth study of his short stories and essays. Such an endeavor would have most likely been beyond the scope of their book. Moreover, at the time when Adler and Feinman's book was published, in 1975, Woody Allen had not yet received his O. Henry Award. A more detailed approach to Woody Allen's short fiction can be found in Maurice Yacowar's 1979 book, *Loser Takes All. The Comic Art of Woody Allen*¹⁴. In his exploration of Woody Allen's comic universe, Maurice Yacowar dedicates two chapters to Allen's prose work and performs an insightful analysis of the wide range of topics tackled by his short stories and casuals, starting from the premise that "the forms of parody and mock-heroic satire are as common in Allen's prose as in his monologues, plays, and films"¹⁵.

Sanford Pinsker seems more interested in Woody Allen's fiction than other scholars, and he published several essays that either include or focus exclusively on Woody Allen's short fiction. In "The Instruments of American-Jewish Humor: Henny Youngman on Violin, Mel Brooks on Drums, Woody Allen on Clarinet,"¹⁶ he briefly surveys Allen's prose with a view to pointing out the Jewish influences pervading Allen's style, but in this case the result reads more like a laudation rather than an insightful

¹⁴ Maurice Yacowar. *Loser Takes All. The Comic Art of Woody Allen*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1979.

¹⁵ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 74.

¹⁶ Sanford Pinsker. "The Instruments of American-Jewish Humor: Henny Youngman on Violin, Mel Brooks on Drums, Woody Allen on Clarinet." *The Massachusetts Review* 22.4 (1981): 739-750.

analysis. Pinsker also explores Allen's short pieces as part of the Benchley-Perelman lineage of *The New Yorker* magazine. In "Comedy and Cultural Timing: The Lessons of Robert Benchley and Woody Allen"¹⁷, Pinsker relies on works by Benchley and Allen to build a case for the American humorous writing (especially that published by *The New Yorker*) and for its importance to the development of the American prose style. Then, in "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones, or How S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen Found It at the Movies"¹⁸, Pinsker analyzes Woody Allen's short pieces published in *Getting Even* in relation to S. J. Perelman's writing. Pinsker's article is an investigation of the paradigm shift undergone by the image of the hero in the late twentieth-century American culture, as articulated in the work of the two humorists.

In his 1983 study "Woody Allen: American prose Humorist,"¹⁹ Marc S. Reisch tackles Woody Allen's humor in terms of "absurd creation" and explores how the figure of the Little Man, the *schlemiel* of the Jewish tradition, becomes the vehicle for humor in Woody Allen's work. An extensive and sensible exploration of Woody Allen's short fiction is offered by Karen C. Blansfield's "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America"²⁰. Blansfield's paper discusses Allen's contribution to the "tradition of the comic

¹⁷ Sanford Pinsker. "Comedy and Cultural Timing: The Lessons of Robert Benchley and Woody Allen." *The Georgia Review* 42.4 (1988): 822-837.

¹⁸ Sanford Pinsker. "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones, or How S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen Found It at the Movies." *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1992. 159-171.

¹⁹ Marc S. Reisch. "Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist." *Journal of Popular Culture* 17.3 (1983: Winter): 67-74.

²⁰ Karen C. Blansfield. "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America." *Studies in American Humor* 6 (1988): 142-153.

imagination in America"²¹ by looking into how he reworks the "formal devices which have shaped American humor since its inception"²² and claims that Allen's work veers towards a "more subjective and more self-conscious"²³ type of humor, thus inviting a new direction for American humorous prose writing.

Woody Allen has, indeed, brought a considerable contribution to the development of American humor; he has employed a large variety of stylistic devices to create comic effects that intrigued several scholars. Maurice Charney's "Woody Allen's non sequiturs"²⁴ is an illustrative example in this respect. Allen's short fiction also provided material for research in linguistics and pragmatics. Isabel Ermida analyzes the comic devices of humorous short stories in her 2008 book *The Language of Comic Narratives. Humor Construction in Short Stories*²⁵ and chose Woody Allen's "The Lunatic's Tale" for her case study. In a shorter study published in 2011 and entitled "'Losers, poltroons and nudniks' in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*: A linguistic approach to comic failure"²⁶ she examines the narrative of failure in Woody Allen's short stories published in *Mere Anarchy*. There are, of course, several other books on Woody Allen's humor using examples from Allen's short

²¹ Blansfield, "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America", 142.

²² Blansfield, "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America", 142.

²³ Blansfield, "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America", 143.

²⁴ Maurice Charney. "Woody Allen's non sequiturs." *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 8.4 (1995): 339-348.

²⁵ Isabel Ermida. *The Language of Comic Narratives. Humor Construction in Short Stories*. Ed. Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008.

²⁶ Isabel Ermida. "'Losers, poltroons and nudniks' in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*: A linguistic approach to comic failure." *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*. Ed. Marta Dynel. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011. 335-352.

fiction, such as Vittorio Hösle's *Woody Allen. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comical*,²⁷ but their main focus remains Woody Allen's film work. Although all these studies provide extremely valuable insights into Woody Allen's humorous devices, the vast corpus of his literary texts still requires further exploration.

Only tangentially touching upon Allen's humorous devices, David Galef²⁸ engages in an entertaining exercise of assessing the literary longevity of Woody Allen's short fiction. Galef builds a solid case for his conclusion that "Allen will stand up longer than his critics"²⁹. In his opinion, the durability of Allen's work is consolidated both by its position in the Benchley-Perelman tradition and by "Allen's blend of high and low cultural references [...] of intellectual neurosis and frustrated carnality [that] suits the taste of academics"³⁰. To the latter point, Galef offers revelatory readings of some of the best-known texts by Woody Allen, pointing out their complexity and erudition. James Wallace's study "The Mousetrap: Reading Woody Allen"³¹ follows a somewhat similar path. He approaches Allen's short stories from a reader's response perspective and analyzes the sophisticated relationship between Woody Allen and his intended readership. What is notable and refreshing about James Wallace's paper – besides not focusing on humor – is that it points to the richness of cultural references in Woody Allen's short stories and to the

²⁷ Vittorio Hösle. *Woody Allen. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comical*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

²⁸ David Galef. "Getting Even: Literary Posterity and the Case for Woody Allen." *South Atlantic Review* 64.2 (1999): 146-160.

²⁹ Galef, "Getting Even", 158.

³⁰ Galef, "Getting Even", 147.

³¹ James M. Wallace. "The Mousetrap: Reading Woody Allen." *Woody Allen and Philosophy*. Ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2004. 69-88.

impossibility of finding an ideal interpretive community able to penetrate beyond the intricate network of allusions the author used. A more recent study dedicated to Woody Allen’s work in which his short fiction is given particular attention is Britta Feyerabend’s 2009 book, *Seems Like Old Times. Postmodern Nostalgia in Woody Allen’s Work*.³² Feyerabend performs a remarkable analysis of Woody Allen’s work by approaching it through the lenses of postmodernist nostalgia. The corpus she chose for her study includes five short stories and one-act plays published in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, most of which are discussed in the chapter entitled “Death and Anxiety.” Britta Feyerabend looks at these texts as exercises in postmodernist nostalgia in order to analyze them against the hermeneutic grid she had prepared for the entire study.

By performing an ample exploration of the major influences which acted upon and shaped Allen’s writing, this book extends its contribution towards enriching the scholarship on the American short story tradition. Such an endeavor is legitimized by Sanford Pinsker’s claim that

[...] some of the best inch-by-inch writing done in our century – writing that has had a permanent effect on the precision, the clarity, and the cadence of American prose – was done by *The New Yorker* humorists who labored on this side of the Atlantic rather than by expatriates who airmailed the latest modernist news from Paris.³³

My contention is that Woody Allen’s short fiction responds to and mirrors a set of factors represented by the immediate

³² Britta Feyerabend. *Seems Like Old Times. Postmodern Nostalgia in Woody Allen’s Work*. Vol. 157. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009.

³³ Sanford Pinsker. “Comedy and Cultural Timing: The Lessons of Robert Benchley and Woody Allen.” *The Georgia Review* 42.4 (1988): 822-837, 830.

literary context of *The New Yorker* magazine, the larger literary context of American postmodernism, and the cultural heritage of Woody Allen's Jewish upbringing. As such, this exploration of Allen's literary work will not limit itself to his comic devices, but will help place his short fiction in a larger literary context. The corpus selected for this research consists of two short story volumes, *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, published by Wings Books in 1991, and *Mere Anarchy*, published in 2008 by Edbury Press. The edition of *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*³⁴ I have chosen includes the other three previously published volumes, *Getting Even* (1971), *Without Feathers* (1975), and *Side Effects* (1980).

The first chapter explores what is probably the most important influence on Woody Allen's writing, namely the literary tradition of *The New Yorker*, the magazine which seems to have always been the preferred venue for the publication of his short stories. Having his texts published by *The New Yorker* was an important achievement at the beginning of his writing career and has influenced his writing to a great extent. *The New Yorker* established itself as one of the most prestigious cultural magazines in the world and, soon after its issuance, became an icon of urban cultural sophistication. The elitist aura of the magazine and the meritocracy implied by the selection process of the material to be published transformed it into a magnet for both aspiring and famous writers. Along its publication without interruption for almost a century now, the pages of the magazine have nestled the works of some of the most influential writers of the twentieth century such as Renata Adler, Donald Barthelme, Saul Bellow,

³⁴ There is another edition entitled *The Insanity Defense. The Complete Prose*, published by Random House in 2007, but it does not include all the texts that can be read in the 1991 Wings Books edition I have chosen.

Jorge Luis Borges, Raymond Carver, John Cheever, E. L. Doctorow, Jamaica Kincaid, Alice Munro, Vladimir Nabokov, Dorothy Parker, Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, J. D. Salinger, or Susan Sontag. The acceptance of Allen's texts by the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* meant both being allowed into one of the most prestigious literary circles of the century and being encouraged to embrace a specific aesthetic tradition, which he would, in turn, continue and remodel. Therefore, the first chapter discusses the magazine's cultural potency and the relationship between *The New Yorker* and its contributors, with focus on the particular case of Woody Allen. Although the aesthetic of *The New Yorker* is not confinable to an all-encompassing definition, the research of scholars who studied the magazine's history and literary influence, such as Ben Yagoda, Mary F. Corey, and Judith Yaross Lee, proved very helpful in establishing a guideline which allowed the assessment of the dynamic relationship between the comic literary tradition of *The New Yorker* and Woody Allen's short fiction. Given their long collaboration, it would be safe to assume that the spirit and the aesthetic direction of *The New Yorker* must have been, from the very beginning, convergent with Woody Allen's creative propensity.

The second chapter investigates the relationship between Woody Allen's short fiction and the larger literary context of postmodernism, the movement that dominated the stage of post-war American literature. The late Sixties represented a period of tempestuous social, political, and cultural changes in American history, closely mirrored by the cultural productions of the age. Sensitive to these social changes, writers begin to challenge traditional literary conventions with impressive ebullience, striving to expose what they seem to perceive as the radical indeterminacy of reality. By placing their stakes on imagined

alternatives and ceaselessly shifting perspectives, postmodernist writers challenge the concept of reality, identity, and totalizing discourses. The orderly chronological sequence of narration is distorted, the center is extirpated, and the neat spatial representation is bent, broken, twisted, and transformed into a metaphor for an unreliable reality; the coherence of a governing consciousness is challenged by fragmentation, the mélange of often contradictory conceptual schemes replaces the exploration of feelings, and language is ceaselessly investigated and interrogated.

Woody Allen's career as a short story writer began under this new paradigm and witnessed the effusion of postmodernist experimentation and playfulness.³⁵ The postmodern relativist outlook governs his writing as he parodically explores a whole repertoire of narrative possibilities and conventions. Therefore, the second chapter deals with the analysis of the postmodernist literary strategies employed and reprocessed by Woody Allen's short fiction. The analysis begins with a brief survey of postmodernism and its manifestation in the sphere of such a flexible literary genre as the short story, and continues with the specific exploration of Woody Allen's short stories in relation to the experimental trend of postmodernism. I decided to analyze Woody Allen's short stories within the framework provided by studies in literary postmodernism by scholars such as Gerhard Hoffman, Brian McHale, Bran Nicol, Linda Hutcheon, and Fredric Jameson. The premise of this chapter is that Woody Allen's short

³⁵ Allen's "The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers" was published by *The New Yorker* in 1966, the year that seems to be a fairly strong candidate for marking the beginning of the postmodern age. See Brian McHale, "Introduction: On or about the Year 1966." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, edited by Brian McHale and Len Platt, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 85-94.

stories can be read as a parody in the second degree of postmodernist literary strategies and that his writing offers a particular exploration of the postmodern ethos. Moreover, I argue that Woody Allen goes one step forward, towards exposing the aesthetic perils of postmodernism's willingness to indulge in extreme experimentation while simultaneously taking one nostalgic step back, toward the strong sense of responsibility and authenticity stemming from the Sartrean humanist existentialism, which he uses as a binder for the de-centered postmodern universe.

As a member of a hyphenated culture, Woody Allen incorporates influences coming from each side of the hyphen. Therefore, the third chapter of this book tackles the ways in which Woody Allen has chosen to use his Jewish cultural legacy, to combine and reshape it in order to reconstruct and revise major human concerns about identity, consciousness, existence, meaning, faith, religion, and morality. Given that his humor is the hallmark of his artistic output, a special subsection is dedicated to the exploration of the implications of the impressively rich Jewish humorous tradition for Woody Allen's short fiction.

Although the questions regarding what Jewish-American literature is and which writer can be claimed by the Jewish-American literary tradition are at the core of a long-standing debate, it provides a rich theoretical background for the exploration of the influence of the Jewish cultural heritage on the work of a particular author. Therefore, I decided to begin the third chapter with a brief survey of the various theoretical standpoints around this matter and continue by discussing the essential elements of what can be labeled Jewish-American writing. Woody Allen is a notable representative of the Jewish-American literary tradition and his Jewish cultural legacy reverberates throughout

his entire work. I also look into Woody Allen's confessions on the implications of his Jewish upbringing in order to understand how he positions himself as a writer with regard to his ethnicity. The premise of this chapter is that Woody Allen shares the sensibilities of writers such as Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, or Isaac Bashevis Singer, as he thoroughly explores the potentialities of the Jewish humorous tradition and he contributes to the remodeling of the stereotype of the *schlemiel*, which he transforms into the acutely self-aware New York Jew.

It is very difficult to approach and investigate Woody Allen's written work without taking into consideration his films. Therefore, when needed, brief incursions into his films will be made, even if they do not make the object of this research. I am well aware of the vast scholarship on Woody Allen's films, and my intention is not to add to it, but to use some of its findings inasmuch as it pertains to the textual literary analysis, thus giving a more inclusive approach to my research.

Tracing the major influences and their manifestation in Woody Allen's short fiction provides the fundamentals to integrate his literary work into several different and, at the same time, interconnected literary traditions. Therefore, I expect the results of the present research to offer an appropriate framework for the valorization of Woody Allen's contribution to twentieth-century American literature.

1.

“Forget the Academy Awards – He was published in *The New Yorker*”¹

1.1. Entering “hallowed ground”

As already mentioned in the introduction, most of Woody Allen’s short stories and casual pieces have been first published in *The New Yorker*, a magazine which has had a great impact on the shaping of the aesthetic taste of the twentieth-century American readership. Woody Allen perceived *The New Yorker* as the writer’s “hallowed ground”² and he admitted that he had always been drawn to the cultural pole of the magazine. Both parties seem to have derived considerable benefit from this collaboration. On one hand, Woody Allen had his texts published in a prestigious, widely read magazine, whose impact on American culture has probably remained unparalleled by any other similar publication. *The New Yorker* seems to have been perceived by writers, be they aspiring

¹ The title of this chapter is borrowed from Stuart Klawans who half-jokingly employs exaggeration to stress out the importance of being published by *The New Yorker*, while also leaving room for derision at the exclusivist pretensions of the magazine. Klawans, Stuart. “Husbands and Wives.” *Perspectives on Woody Allen*. Ed. Renée R. Curry. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996. 52-54, 52.

² Allen quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 368.

or established, as the ideal venue to launch or consolidate their literary career. On the other hand, Woody Allen's infusion of lively, humorous, and sophisticated writing helped preserve, reinforce, and remodel the spirit of *The New Yorker*, just as its founder, Harold Ross, had envisaged it.

The New Yorker is, undoubtedly, one of the most influential intellectual magazines in the United States. It offers high-quality humor, culture, and intellectual stimulation to its readers. Soon after its appearance, it turned into an icon of metropolitan sophistication and it derived its power "from its association with Manhattan, which [in the postwar years] had become the most powerful urban center in the world."³

Founded in 1925 by Harold Ross, a member of the Algonquin Round Table⁴, *The New Yorker* was meant as a "reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life," which promoted "gaiety, wit, and satire"⁵. If the first few issues failed to convince the smart urbanites about the quality of the magazine, by the beginning of the 1930s, *The New Yorker* "would hit its stride"⁶. Although set out as a humorous magazine, *The New Yorker*

³ Mary F. Corey. *The World through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999, x.

⁴ The Algonquin Round Table was a group of writers, actors, critics, journalists, and intellectuals who met at the Algonquin Hotel to discuss their literary and artistic activities and to play practical jokes on each other. Their meetings began in 1919. Some of the notable members of the group were Dorothy Parker, Robert E. Sherwood, Alexander Woollcott, Harpo Marx, Robert Benchley, and Frank Sullivan. See Yagoda, *About Town*, 30-33.

⁵ Ross quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 38.

⁶ George H. Douglas. *The Smart Magazines: 50 years of literary revelry & high jinks at Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Life, Esquire and The Smart Set*. Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1991, 130.

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disapproved of vulgar and slapstick humor. It was designed in such a way as to differentiate itself from existing humorous magazines, such as *Life*, *Judge*, or the rather highbrow *Vanity Fair*. In the prospectus that Harold Ross sent to potential investors and subscribers, he wrote that the magazine “will not be what is commonly called highbrow or radical. It will be what is commonly called sophisticated, in that it will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers”⁷. ‘Sophistication’ became the keyword for *The New Yorker*. On the other hand, Harold Ross’ famous statement that the magazine “is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque”⁸ soon became the target of parody and satire from fellow journalists. Indeed, other journalists did not receive the first issue of the magazine very well, but it sold out quickly, and after the problematic early months of the magazine⁹, Harold Ross responded to the growing popularity of *The New Yorker* by increasing the printing number.

The New Yorker did not initially target a national audience, but focused on promoting a set of urban values which turned the city of New York into a symbol of style and sophistication; it did not intend to offer the mass entertainment of large circulation magazines, but it addressed an upper-middle class readership, “a small elite of city sophisticates”¹⁰. Still, by 1965, *The New Yorker* had more than half a million subscribers, most of them living outside

⁷ Ross quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 39.

⁸ Yagoda, *About Town*, 39.

⁹ According to George H. Douglas, the first months of the magazine’s existence were extremely difficult, as the dropping of sales caused serious financial problems. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, it consolidated its position and broadened its readership beyond the initial expectations of its founder, thus embodying “one of the most phenomenally successful ventures in American publishing history”. Douglas, *The Smart Magazines*, 130.

¹⁰ Douglas, *The Smart Magazines*, 130.

New York, which meant that the style and culture of New York were found appealing far beyond the region they reflected. Moreover, *The New Yorker* enjoyed a degree of devotion on the part of its readers unparalleled by similar publications¹¹. *The New Yorker* encouraged literacy and promoted self-education among middle-class readers and also responded to the intellectual stimulation needs of the elite culture.

Harold Ross founded a magazine that created a new category of cartoons, exerted considerable influence upon twentieth-century American fiction, and redefined standards for American journalism. *The New Yorker* fostered the development of a subculture of the educated, sophisticated urbanites, by offering them an alternative to the trivialities of mass culture, an elitist venue where they could nourish their illusions and sense of intellectual superiority. As Mary F. Corey noted, “Ross created a distinctly modern magazine that altered the style and content of contemporary American fiction, perfected a new form of literary journalism, established new standards for humor and comic art, and shaped numerous social and cultural agendas”¹². Harold Ross

¹¹ Ben Yagoda begins his book *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* with a survey of the magazine’s readership and their attachment to the magazine. One of the most dramatic testimonials is that of Ms Hannah M. Turner who worked for the Red Cross during WWII. When helping the wounded in Northern Italy, Ms. Turner was asked by one of the soldiers: “If you could have anything right now, what would it be? I don’t mean anything abstract... something physical, something you could put your hands on.” Her answer was: “An issue of the *New Yorker* magazine.” Ms. Turner’s letter continues as follows: “He looked stunned and he started to laugh and his eyes lit up [...] But what he really wanted to talk about was the *New Yorker*. So we reminisced about our favorite cartoons and writers and spent perhaps fifteen minutes in another world, one that was familiar and funny and far, far away from that one.” See Yagoda, *About Town*, 11.

¹² Corey, *The World through a Monocle*, 3.

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ran the magazine until his death, in 1952. His successor, William Shawn, did his best to follow in the steps of his predecessor and succeeded in preserving and consolidating the spirit of the magazine, as it had been designed by its founder. In his book *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, Ben Yagoda sums up the essential characteristics of *The New Yorker* in one paragraph:

The *New Yorker* was sophistication in the form of a weekly magazine; its early incarnation was animated by the qualities embodied in the world. It was knowing, a trifle world-weary, prone to self-consciousness and irony, scornful of conversational wisdom or morality, resistant to enthusiasm or wholehearted commitment of any kind, and incapable of being shocked.¹³

The first issue of *The New Yorker* appeared on February 21st, 1925, with a cover by Rea Irvin who introduced Mr. Eustace Tilley¹⁴ to society. Mr. Eustace Tilley, the dandy with a monocle and a high hat, his shoulders broad enough to sustain the heavy load of urban sophistication promoted by the magazine, became the iconic figure of *The New Yorker*. Mr. Tilley was passionate about high-quality short stories, arty and witty cartoons, anecdotic and ironical profiles, reliable and accurate journalism, and would always share information about the most interesting cultural events in town.

¹³ Yagoda, *About Town*, 57.

¹⁴ David Weir argues that the symbolic figure of the magazine was not an original creation and that “the magazine borrowed the emblem of a dandified aesthete peering through a monocle from *The Chap-Book* ..., adding a butterfly design derived from Whistler by way of Beardsley”. See David Weir. *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890-1926*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008, 167.

The quality of *The New Yorker's* journalism consolidated the magazine's reputation as an upstanding publication, its integrity beyond doubt. Often, the publication of an article was delayed because no one would ever dare bend the magazine's triple-checking policy. Even though events were sometimes reported late, the editors preferred this delay to the risk of inaccuracy. *The New Yorker* is also credited for a series of high-impact articles. For example, on August 31, 1946, *The New Yorker* published the article "Hiroshima" by Pulitzer Prize winner John Hersey, thus being the first magazine to cover the aftermath of the events which ended World War II, including the number of casualties among civilians. "Hiroshima" was the first article to raise the awareness of the American public regarding the implications of the event on a human level, by telling the stories of innocent civilians whose lives had been ended or ruined by the atomic bomb. This was the article that transformed the image of the abstract Japanese enemy into a real human being, worthy of empathy and consideration. Thus, the magazine, conceived at first as a light weekly, started to show real concern with the problems of the world and got involved in more serious issues that troubled the American society. It also published extensive coverage of the Nuremberg trials, promoted environmentalism and protested, in the late sixties, against the war in Vietnam.

Cultural events and personalities enjoyed remarkable attention from the magazine. Along with the journalists, the art critics of *The New Yorker* have also been credited with a series of innovations. For example, it was *The New Yorker* art critic Robert Coates who coined the term *abstract expressionism* in his 1946 article on the work of Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky¹⁵. The profiles

¹⁵ Peter Schjeldahl. "Action Figures. The fifties in paintings and words." *The New Yorker* 19 May 2008. online. 14 June 2012. <<https://www.newyorker.com>>.

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section of the magazine has always been dedicated to the life of artists, writers, and other cultural personalities. The profiles published by *The New Yorker* did not focus so much on facts. As journalist and writer David Remnick remarked, *The New Yorker* profiles often “prized intimacy and wit over biographical completeness”¹⁶. Nevertheless, they were devoid of any tabloid intention. As John Lahr explains, *The New Yorker* profile was “a short exercise in biography – a tight form in which interview, anecdote, observation, description, and analysis are brought to bear on the public and the private self”¹⁷. Over the years, *The New Yorker* has published an impressive portrait gallery.

The short fiction and the comic art published in *The New Yorker* both echoed and consolidated the magazine’s aura of sophistication. *The New Yorker* cultivated these genres to such an extent that, in time, they came to be referred to as distinctive aesthetic categories: ‘the *New Yorker* cartoon’ and ‘the *New Yorker* short story.’ The birth of this new breed of artistic expression signaled that both the short stories and the cartoons published in *The New Yorker* “transcended mere genres and became cultural categories, the very names implying a specific kind of aesthetic lens on experience”¹⁸.

As Judith Yaross Lee observes, the category of *The New Yorker* cartoon stands out by its refusal of dialogue, thus making the entire comic effect spring from a single catch line or comment. Moreover, the cartoons “developed humor based on character rather than situation”¹⁹, thus toying with and reinforcing

¹⁶ Remnick, David, ed. *Life Stories: Profiles from the New Yorker*. London: Pavilion Books, 2001, x.

¹⁷ Lahr, *Show and Tell*, xiii.

¹⁸ Yagoda, *About Town*, 12.

¹⁹ Judith Yaross Lee. *Defining New Yorker Humor*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2000, 213.

metropolitan stereotypes. The *New Yorker* cartoon subscribes to the magazine's elitist and erudite claims. The jokes always seem to be designed for the sophisticated metropolitan intellectual who is often turned into the very target of the satirical intentions of the caption. Besides Rea Irvin, the first art director of *The New Yorker* and the creator of Mr. Eustace Tilley, *The New Yorker* collaborated with some of the best artists and cartoonists of the day, among whom Peter Arno, James Thurber, Saul Steinberg,²⁰ or Art Spiegelman.

The New Yorker also established a respected literary tradition that shaped the literary taste of its readership and influenced the literary style of all of its contributors. Besides the category of '*The New Yorker* short story', the magazine invented a new genre, the *casual*, "by crossing fiction with the informal essay"²¹. The casual pieces are light, witty texts, meant for the entertainment of the readers. The term is attributed to Katherine White, the first fiction editor of the magazine.

During the first decade of its history, the magazine's aesthetic direction was rather vague and its eclectic content was unified only by the common New York theme. According to Ben Yagoda, the quality of the short stories published in *The New Yorker* came to be appreciated only in the early 1940s, after Katherine White had published an anthology entitled *Short Stories from The New Yorker*. A year later, Edward O'Brien decided to include three of those short stories in his anthology, *Best American Short Stories*. Thenceforth, short stories from *The New Yorker* have been published in the series of anthologies initiated by Edward O'Brien. His successor, Martha Foley, even wondered whether the readers of *The New Yorker* could appreciate "the fine character of the fiction

²⁰ The Jewish Romanian-born artist Saul Steinberg obtained his American visa based on a letter of invitation from *The New Yorker*.

²¹ Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 244.

published in the magazine.”²² After World War II, “the magazine became [...] the most sought-after literary showplace in the country”²³. Prestige rather than financial gain seems to have motivated the writers of *The New Yorker* to submit their best work to the magazine. Of course, those who did not believe in the intrinsic value of being published in the magazine ceased to send texts. Such is the case of Scott Fitzgerald who would rather sell his short pieces to *Collier's*, *Esquire*, or *Saturday Night Post*, which paid more than *The New Yorker*.²⁴

The literary tradition of *The New Yorker* is credited for shaping the aesthetic taste of its readers and increasing their sensitivity to high-quality fiction. It is also acknowledged for consolidating literary modernism on American soil. When discussing the short stories published in *The New Yorker* during the first decades of its history, Ben Yagoda emphasizes the affinity between *The New Yorker* short stories and the European modernist tradition. In Ben Yagoda's words,

they bear a striking resemblance to the matter-of-fact epiphanies and meticulously observed slices of life in the short stories generally recognized as bringing modernism to the genre: James Joyce in his 1914 *Dubliners* and Katherine Mansfield, in several collections published before her death in 1923, as well as to those writers' common ancestor, Anton Chekhov. American writers seeking to create 'modern' short stories, such as Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, and (though he might have not realized it) Lardner, tended to push emotion more roughly to the surface. In the words of the critic Andrew Levy, the more genteel strain of modernism slipped into America 'through the back door', courtesy of the *New Yorker*.²⁵

²² Yagoda, *About Town*, 151.

²³ Yagoda, *About Town*, 215.

²⁴ Yagoda, *About Town*, 153.

²⁵ Yagoda, *About Town*, 153-4.

Apparently, the short fiction published in *The New Yorker* was more constitutive of the American modernism than the work done by the American writers in Paris²⁶. Judith Yaross Lee elaborates on a similar point and claims that the close relationship between the literary tradition of *The New Yorker* and the values and interests of modernist literary experiments creates a common realm for the reconciliation of highbrow and lowbrow tendencies. In Lee's words,

Mock-oral writing's focus on the present moment and, thus, its use of present tense also links it to the twenties' modernist literary experiments, giving *New Yorker* humor currency as well as familiarity, bridging high literary culture and low.²⁷

The attempt at reconciling cultural extremes does not always work in favor of the magazine. In his 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg launches an attack against the commercial renditions of art and disparages *The New Yorker's* literary and artistic merits by stating that,

A magazine like the *New Yorker*, which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde material for its own uses. Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better.²⁸

Despite the controversies the magazine had stirred over the years, either because of the rejection of certain texts or because of

²⁶ See also Pinsker, "Comedy and Cultural Timing", 830.

²⁷ Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 247.

²⁸ Clement Greenberg. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *The New York Intellectuals Reader*. Ed. Neil Jumanville. New York & London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007, 149-150.

its standardization effect on the readers' aesthetic preferences, *The New Yorker* transcended the role of mere magazine and became an institution, "a totem for the educated American middle and upper-middle classes"²⁹. As Ben Yagoda noted, "the *New Yorker* did more than any other entity to create 'our' sense of what was proper English prose and what was not, what was in good taste and what was not"³⁰. For many aspiring writers and poets, *The New Yorker* represented the best venue for the launch of their literary careers. A considerable number of texts published first in *The New Yorker* would soon become some of the best-known and most anthologized texts of twentieth-century American literature. Irvin Shaw, J. D. Salinger³¹, John Cheever, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Donald Barthelme, and Raymond Carver are only some of the most famous writers who contributed to *The New Yorker*. On the other hand, "the *New Yorker* Record held carbons of enough rejection notes [...] to make a grin anthology"³², and part of those rejection letters was addressed to some of the best writers of the twentieth-century American letters: Gertrude Stein, Thomas Pynchon, Jack Kerouac, Nelson Algren, Joseph Heller, Lillian Hellman, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., or William Gass. While some of them gave up, others became as long-term contributors.

The New Yorker was "the holy grail of the young fiction writer"³³. Being published in *The New Yorker* was, for many writers,

²⁹ Yagoda, *About Town*, 24.

³⁰ Yagoda, *About Town*, 12.

³¹ J. D. Salinger is sometimes referred to as the 'archetypal *New Yorker* writer' because of the satiric attack he launches against the phoniness of the sophisticated life of the metropolis. See Kasia Boddy. *The American Short Story since 1950*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 40-42.

³² Yagoda, *About Town*, 18.

³³ Stephen King quoted in Boddy, *The American Short Story*, 38.

a notable acknowledgment of literary talent. John Updike admitted that his "sole ambition was to make the *New Yorker*"³⁴, while Sylvia Plath thought of the magazine as her "unclimbed Annapurnas"³⁵. *The New Yorker* was a trademark of mainstream elitism and both aspiring and established writers yearned to be associated with the set of values it had come to stand for.

If the writers of *The New Yorker*'s early years had to adapt to the aesthetic orientation of the magazine, which shaped along with their writing, the generation of writers who came of age during the Sixties had grown up with the cult of the magazine; Woody Allen is part of the latter group. To Allen, having his texts published by the magazine meant that he had been granted access to a realm of elitist metropolitan culture. It was the acknowledgment that the gags of the beginning of his career had matured into a more sophisticated type of entertainment for intellectuals. As Stuart Klawans puts it, "[h]aving started out as a scuffling autodidact from Brooklyn, Allen succeeded by the late seventies in turning himself into a Manhattan sophisticate. Forget the Academy Awards – he was published in *The New Yorker*"³⁶.

When *The New Yorker* accepted his first piece, "The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers," and published it in the issue of January 22, 1966, Woody Allen admitted that he could hardly believe it. He was willing to sacrifice his writing in whatever ways would make it fit for publication because he was very much aware of the prestige and the value that the magazine could add to his work.

³⁴ Updike quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 302.

³⁵ Yagoda, *About Town*, 301.

³⁶ Stuart Klawans. "Husbands and Wives." *Perspectives on Woody Allen*. Ed. Renée R. Curry. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996. 52-54, 52.

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Remembering the first acceptance letter he received from *The New Yorker*, Woody Allen confessed:

I thought the first thing they bought from me was a freak. ... I thought, "Well, I'm never going to sell them anything again in my life." I remember they said they wondered if I was willing to rewrite the ending. And, you know, I would have been willing to turn the ending into an aquafoil. Then I sent them the next thing and they bought it right off and I started to feel more confident.³⁷

Having one's writing skills acknowledged by *The New Yorker* would understandably result in a boost of confidence. Unlike other writers, Woody Allen did not protest against the changes suggested by the fiction editors. Eager to have his texts published in the pages of the prestigious magazine, he was willing to do whatever it took to accommodate the fiction editor's demands. He once confessed that "[t]hey didn't know I'd do anything to have them print my stuff"³⁸. As a matter of fact, they did. Roger Angell, Katherine White's son and her successor as the chief fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, recalled how complying and easy to work with Woody Allen was: "[w]hen he handed in one piece, my reaction was that it was too funny. ... There was a laugh on every line, and I felt it didn't give the readers a chance to catch their breath. When I told that to Woody, he said under his breath, 'Hmmm. Too funny.' Then he made the changes"³⁹.

From 1966 until 1980, Woody Allen had twenty-eight short stories published in *The New Yorker*, including some of his most famous texts such as "Hassidic Tales with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar" in which he absorbed the

³⁷ Allen quoted in Eric Lax. *Woody Allen and His Comedy*. Hamish, Hamilton & London: Elm Tree Books, 1975, 223.

³⁸ Allen quoted in Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 150.

³⁹ Angell quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

vernacular of Hasidic storytelling and Talmudic interpretation, "My Philosophy", which ends with some of his most famous aphorisms, "The Whore of Mensa", one of his most popular short stories⁴⁰, and the O. Henry Award winner, "The Kugelmass Episode". In 1980, Woody Allen ceased to submit short stories to *The New Yorker* because he wanted to put more energy into his film work. Nevertheless, in 2000 he resumed his collaboration with the magazine and he has been contributing short fiction and casual pieces to *The New Yorker* to this day. Passionate about writing and thinking highly of *The New Yorker*, Woody Allen confesses: "writing is pure gravy. Every time I get a piece published in the *New Yorker*, it's like the first time all over again"⁴¹.

Bill Adler and Jerry Feinman viewed Woody Allen's collaboration with *The New Yorker* as the university dropout's way of getting even with the academic world⁴². Adler and Feinman write:

⁴⁰ "The Whore of Mensa" is still one of Woody Allen's most popular short stories. Even today there are several personal blogs where people discuss the text. Moreover, the short story inspired a journal entitled "The Whores of Mensa" which publishes "sequential literature for the masses." (see www.whoresofmensa.com).

⁴¹ Allen quoted in Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 5.

⁴² The explanation that Adler and Feinman give to the title of Woody Allen's short stories volume *Getting Even* has not been confirmed by the author, yet it seems adequate, especially since the volume includes "The Spring Bulletin", a parody of university course bulletin, where Woody Allen ridicules academic curricula and emphasizes their failure in providing genuine guidelines and solutions. On the other hand, Marc S. Reisch comes up with a different explanation which points to Woody Allen's continuous struggle with the absurdity of life and sees the short stories in the volume as "the effort to 'get even' with the imbecilities of the world" (73). While the source of the titles of the second and of the fourth volumes are easier to trace (*Without Feathers* hints to Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers" and *Mere Anarchy* William Butler Yeats "The Second Coming"), the titles of *Getting Even* and *Side Effects* elude definitive explanations.

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Whether accurately or not, the *New Yorker* has been called the most influential intellectual magazine in the country. One thing for sure, it's read by a lot of people with college degrees. And now, Woody Allen is read by a lot of people with college degrees. And they're laughing. B.A.s and M.A.s and even PhDs have become Woody Allen fans. What a way of getting even.⁴³

It is true that the magazine enjoyed a highly educated readership from the very beginning and even more so in the Sixties. Due to the radicalization of the magazine and the militant position it adopted during the second half of the decade, its readership changed. *The New Yorker* slowly left the business area and started to address students and the academic world. J. Kennard Bosse, then treasurer of the magazine, remembered that "the numbers [of readers] didn't change, but where before there were top executives of Fortune 500 companies, now they were replaced with a bunch of kids. The thrust was to a lower audience. The demographics never went up again"⁴⁴.

Whether being published in *The New Yorker* was seen by Woody Allen as a chance to get even with the academic world, as implied by Adler and Feinman, is not as important as the fact that the magazine offered him the opportunity to address a large, educated audience and imprinted on his writing the mark of sophistication associated with *The New Yorker*. Both sides enjoyed the strategic benefits of this collaboration since Woody Allen's texts also contributed to the invigoration of the magazine. His style, in the lineage of Robert Benchley, Sidney Joseph Perelman, or James Thurber, was a blessing for *The New Yorker*. In Ben Yagoda's words, Woody Allen's short pieces "were a shot in the

⁴³ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 150.

⁴⁴ Bosse quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 364.

arm for *The New Yorker* casual, precisely because, in the manner of Perelman, they were not casual"⁴⁵.

In the early Sixties, *The New Yorker* was apparently in need of a change. *The New Yorker* of the previous decade had lost its spirit and carefree enjoyment of life and became the excessively self-satisfied magazine scorned by James Thurber's 1958 conversation with Henry Brandon, "Everybody Is Getting Very Serious", originally published in the *New Republic*⁴⁶. The wearisome stiltedness and pompous propriety of the magazine constituted the target of Tom Wolfe's vitriolic attack⁴⁷ against *The New Yorker* in his article entitled "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead!" and published in the *Herald Tribune* in 1965.⁴⁸ However, the second half of the Sixties brought along a series of changes which invigorated the spirit of *The New Yorker*, paving the way for what Ben Yagoda

⁴⁵ Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Fensch, ed. *Conversations with James Thurber*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989, 93-97.

⁴⁷ See Yagoda, *About Town*, 334-341.

⁴⁸ It is natural for a magazine to reflect the mores and the trends of the culture which produced it and to which it is addressed. By mirroring the cultural myopia of the American post-war society, *The New Yorker* of the Fifties had become a pompous, conservative, excessively prudish publication. This caused a large crevasse between the magazine and some of its most promising writers. John Cheever, a long-term contributor of the magazine, had a series of texts rejected during this period because they contained explicit sexual scenes and *The New Yorker* was not for "the sort of people who told dirty stories to mixed company" (Cheever quoted in Boddy, 52). Also, Philip Roth could not publish *Goodbye, Columbus* in *The New Yorker*, not because the length of the text, but because of the scene when Brenda's mother finds her daughter's diaphragm. Moreover, words which hinted to the physiological or other undignified aspects of life were perceived as posing a threat to the sophisticated aura of the magazine and were banned from its pages. See Yagoda, *About Town*, 296-7.

1. Forget the Academy Awards – He was published in *The New Yorker* calls “another golden age” in the history of the magazine⁴⁹. In the mid-Sixties, *The New Yorker* recovered its gaiety and wit and embraced a militant position unknown to the magazine until that moment. If the fiction of the previous decades was governed by the work of writers such as J.D. Salinger, John Cheever, and John Updike, in the Sixties Donald Barthelme becomes *The New Yorker*’s favorite writer. The magazine got more tolerant of postmodernist fictional experiments, and surrealist fiction was permitted in its pages. By the time Woody Allen sent his first piece to *The New Yorker*, the magazine was already prepared to accept his exuberant surrealism and his ebullient postmodernist playfulness. At the same time, Woody Allen was prepared to synchronize his writing to the recently regained pulse of the magazine.

1.2. The recipe for “sheer dessert” – Woody Allen’s short stories for *The New Yorker*

When referring to the short pieces he wrote for *The New Yorker*, Woody Allen calls them “sheer dessert,”⁵⁰ a phrase that reveals both the pleasure intended for the readers and the satisfaction he has when assuming the role of short story writer. Unlike filmmaking, the process of writing responds to Woody Allen’s isolationist and escapist needs, as he confessed in a conversation with Eric Lax:

I like writing for *The New Yorker*. I like the pure joy of waking up in my house, having my breakfast, going into a room by myself, and writing. It’s pleasurable because it’s lazy and escapist. You don’t have to deal with anybody, you don’t have to see anybody,

⁴⁹ Yagoda, *About Town*, 366-7.

⁵⁰ Allen quoted in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, 224.

you're never on the line. There's nothing to the job – although I'm not saying it comes easy.⁵¹

Although it is common to refer to the fiction published in *The New Yorker* as a distinctive category that has seemingly created a specific literary tradition, most attempts to define the particular aesthetic coordinates of *The New Yorker* short story stir controversy and fail to come up with an all-encompassing solution. Of course, such a generally valid solution is more of a utopian desideratum than a realistic endeavor, especially in the case of a weekly magazine that has undergone a series of changes in order to accommodate the needs of its readers for almost a century. Nevertheless, a basic aesthetic framework would be more than helpful in assessing the coherence of the fiction editor's demands as well as the value of the published works.

Even if the fiction editors of the magazine seemed to have a very clear idea as to what kind of texts would be in tune with the spirit of the magazine, the rejection letters sent to writers frequently relied on the least convincing, often amusing justifications. In a letter in which she tried to explain the rejection of "In the Charming City" by Morley Callaghan, Katherine White wrote: "Mr. Ross feels that the short stories we use have to be quite special in type – *New Yorker*-ish – if that word means anything to you ..."⁵². An attentive exploration of the short fiction and the casual pieces published by *The New Yorker* along its entire history might lead to the conclusion that the significance of 'that word' escapes even the venerable Mr. Eustace Tilley. In a 1945 letter to Mrs. Norton Baskin, Harold Ross admits to the high degree of subjectivity involved in the selection of the materials to be

⁵¹ Allen quoted in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, 220.

⁵² White quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 55.

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published when he writes: “[w]e are unquestionably captious and careless frequently and occasionally we suggest changes for the mere sake of change, or for a peculiar personal feeling, ...”⁵³. Renata Adler, a long-term contributor to the magazine, reveals her skepticism with regard to this distinctive short fiction category by claiming that the ‘sensibility’ guiding the acceptance of a text in the pages of *The New Yorker* “was formed and altered by the publication of each piece”⁵⁴. On the other hand, James Purdy remarked that “if you read all their stories every week for a year you’d begin to think that most of them were written by the same person using different names”⁵⁵. Eventually, Purdy’s derogatory intention, apart from denouncing what he saw as a wearisome series of literary texts, points to a spirit and an aesthetic trend specific to *The New Yorker*, whose main coordinates can be traced back to Harold Ross’ 1925 prospectus and can be defined both by closely analyzing the texts published in the magazine and *via negativa*, by looking at the rejection letters mailed to all the writers whose texts had not been considered *New Yorker-ish* enough.⁵⁶

The prerequisite for a text to make it into *The New Yorker* was, of course, to embrace a New York theme. The experience of the sophisticated urban reality was the only one that could find representation in the magazine. *The New Yorker* has always demonstrated a distinct preference for the stylized rendering of urban experience, for the fictional retelling of different aspects of contemporary life, which involved characters belonging to the

⁵³ Ross quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 56.

⁵⁴ Adler quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 56.

⁵⁵ Purdy quoted in William Peden. *The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940-1975*. 2nd Edition. Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975, 12.

⁵⁶ Ben Yagoda’s *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made* provides several examples of such rejection letters.

upper-middle class and coming from a geographical context closely resembling the New York metropolitan space. This preference found justification in the magazine's declared attempt to render the local color and the full flavor of metropolitan life.

Given that *The New Yorker* had been designed as a humorous magazine from the very beginning, it was only natural that the editors should always require humorous short stories. Both cartoonists and comic writers bore the responsibility for "charting the outlines of the '*New Yorker* school of humor'"⁵⁷ and for reinforcing the tradition of "chic American humor"⁵⁸ established by Harold Ross. As set forth by its founder, the magazine would always refuse vulgar and slapstick humor, but would encourage witty texts in which the humorous effect sprang from intellectual games and erudite references, thus transforming *The New Yorker* prose humor into "a contemporary, urban scion of America's most distinguished comic tradition"⁵⁹.

Another significant requirement of *The New Yorker's* fiction editors was that the text be bereft of sentimentalism. Writers have always been required to rise above the emotional and the pathetic mode and work towards entertaining the intellect since the deep exploration of human emotions was considered inadequate to the spirit of the magazine. In a 1948 letter to Harold Ross, writer Kay Boyle confessed: "[i]f my hero wished to tell the girl he loved her, he would say so, right out, in my book – but for the *New Yorker* I am certain I would write, 'I love you, I think, somewhat' – or 'It feels a little like love'"⁶⁰. The shift from the emotional to the

⁵⁷ Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill. *America's Humor: from Poor Richard to Doonesbury*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 421.

⁵⁸ Blair and Hill, *America's Humor*, 417.

⁵⁹ Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 247.

⁶⁰ Boyle quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 205.

rational was viewed as a sign of sophistication, and therefore, erudite, intellectual references have always been preferred to pathetic explorations of human experience.

If during the first four decades of the magazine's history, the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* manifested a fairly traditional taste in fiction and demonstrated low tolerance for the fantastic, the gothic, for allegorical fiction, and for marginal, experimental, subversive writing, in the mid-Sixties they opened up to surrealism and to postmodern playfulness, "especially if its subject matter was urban and its tone ironic"⁶¹. *The New Yorker* started to publish short stories by Donald Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges, Don DeLillo, and other representatives of postmodernist fiction.

While the letters of rejection would not usually cause any further discussion, the quarrels between the writers and the fiction editors were common when a text had been accepted for publication. The editors' obsession with grammatical correctness⁶², with a clear and explicit writing style, would often ruin the authors' efforts to create the ambiguities they considered of uttermost importance to their texts. Vladimir Nabokov is famous for his resistance to the changes made by *The New Yorker's* editors. "Why not have the reader re-read a sentence now and then? It won't hurt him"⁶³, he said in a futile attempt to defend his texts. Nevertheless, the parochial attitudes and the dictatorial voices of the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* would most often win the

⁶¹ Boddy, *The American Short Story*, 40.

⁶² George H. Douglas claims that Harold Ross' almost maniacal "preoccupation with punctuation marks" can be understood as compensation for his "inferior education" and "huge pockets of ignorance" (Douglas, 132). Apparently, this preoccupation with commas, periods, and semicolons has been passed on to the fiction editors of the magazine.

⁶³ Nabokov quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 226.

argument, since the conformation to their trenchant recommendations was an essential requirement for the publication of the text.

While the set of coordinates described above seems to guide the large majority of texts published by *The New Yorker*, the fiction editors often bent the rules. For example, Eudora Welty's short story "No Place for You, My Love," published on September 20, 1952, disregards all the above-mentioned characteristics. First of all, it is not a humorous text, nor does it abound in intellectual references. It explores the valences of human emotion and romantic attachment, even if it does it in an indirect, covert manner. Moreover, the story is set in the American South, and apart from the opening and the closing scenes of the short story, which take place in New Orleans, the trip that the two characters take changes the scenery and projects the reader into a rural jungle-like space, populated by insects, alligators, crayfish, and naked children. The only thing tying the story to the New York metropolitan space is the last paragraph where Welty writes: "as he drove the little Ford safely to its garage, he remembered for the first time in years when he was young and brash, a student in New York, and the shriek and horror and unholy smother of the subway had its original meaning for him as the lilt and expectation of love"⁶⁴. This last paragraph seems out of place and reads more like a compromise. It does little to enrich the short story and feels more like a loose end, which allows the assumption that it might have been introduced into the text with the purpose of stretching it enough as to fit at least one measure of the Procrustean bed laid by *The New Yorker's* fiction editors. Although numerous examples of texts which made it into the pages of the magazine without abiding by the rules can be found, the humorous touch, the intellectual

⁶⁴ Eudora Welty. "No Place for You, My Love." *The New Yorker* (1952): 37-44, 44.

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references, and the elitist metropolitan style remain the differentiating features of the short fiction, the cartoons, and the journalism published in *The New Yorker*.

1.2.1. “... as intensely urban as man can be”⁶⁵

Probably because he felt their “most illiterate writer,”⁶⁶ Woody Allen worked hard to improve his writing technique and to come up with better, more humorous and more sophisticated pieces in order to accommodate the literary requirements of *The New Yorker*. The New York-related theme has never been a problem in the case of Woody Allen who is “metropolitan to the bone”⁶⁷. His entire work testifies to an intimate knowledge of the city’s subtleties. To Allen, the city is not only an endless reservoir of creative resources, but the only source that can fuel his artistic drives; as he confessed in a *Rolling Stone* interview, the only reality he accepted and felt comfortable with was that of the urban environment:

I am definitely a child of the city streets, and I feel at home on my own two feet, you know, not in a car or a train or anything like that. In Manhattan, I know the town. I know how to get places. I know where to get cabs. I know where to duck in and go to the bathroom

⁶⁵ Adler and Feinman claim that “Woody is as intensely urban as a man can be” (75).

⁶⁶ Woody Allen tells Eric Lax in a discussion about his collaboration with *The New Yorker*: “When I first wrote for them, I always assumed that it had to be complex, because I’m probably their most illiterate writer – my grammar and spelling are just laughable. What I’ve been trying to do is get more and better laughs clearer and easier”. Allen quoted in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, 223.

⁶⁷ Lahr, *Show and Tell*, 1.

if I have to. And what restaurants to eat at and which ones to avoid.
I just feel at home in the city.⁶⁸

Woody Allen's short stories convey a sense of immersion into the urban space and his narrative always cleaves to the upper-middle class metropolitan life. The relationship between his characters and the city is both conceptual and material. The grandeur of the city mesmerizes its inhabitants while the gridded urban landscape protects modern man's anxieties and neuroses against the perils of nature and wilderness. The pulsating urban chaos is always in tune with the agonizing existential struggle of the characters.

Woody Allen's preference for the urban space is reinforced by his abhorrence of the rural and the pastoral. As he confessed, "[t]he woods make me nervous. All those damn birds in the morning. I can't sleep. Really. There's so much *noise* in the country"⁶⁹. Similarly, in Woody Allen's short fiction, bucolic countryside environments are completely devoid of paradisiacal innocence and idyllic charm. In "The Early Essays" he makes his position very clear by describing the activity of wandering through a copse and picking violets as nonsensical and dangerous, thus expressing his unsympathetic view of nature and the countryside. Allen writes:

This is no fun at all, and I would recommend almost any other activity. Try visiting a sick friend. If this is impossible, see a show or get into a nice warm tub and read. Anything is better than turning up in a copse with one of those vacuous smiles and accumulating flowers in a basket. Next thing you know, you'll be skipping to and fro. What are you going to do with the violets once

⁶⁸ Allen in Sunshine, Linda (ed.). *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1993, 80.

⁶⁹ Allen quoted in Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 74.

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you get them, anyhow? “Why, put them in a vase,” you say. What a stupid answer. Nowadays you call the florist and order by phone. Let *him* trip through the copse, he’s getting paid for it. That way, if an electrical storm comes up or a beehive is chanced upon, it will be the florist who is rushed to Mount Sinai.⁷⁰

Not only that nature had lost its redemptory power – and Allen probably doubts it ever had one – but it is perceived as embedding the greatest perils, the deadliest threats that can befall the anxious human being who sees the urban space as the protective realm for the anxieties, the existential insecurity, and the chronic unhappiness that have come to define life. Therefore, the city becomes the grand protector of life as the ‘Allen self’ knows it.

David Brauner sees an ethnic connection in Woody Allen’s predisposition for the urban space and rejection of the countryside, and aligns it to what he describes as the general tendency of Jewish-American writers to deflate the “utopian myths of the pastoral”⁷¹, which he also reads in Philip Roth’s and in Saul Bellow’s novels. Brauner argues that “[i]n Woody Allen’s films, too, the country, far from being an Edenic paradise, is simply a place where there is no culture and where you are vulnerable to all sorts of dangers (from anti-Semitism to insect life)”⁷². It is, of course, beyond the power of the neurotic self, drawing on the stereotype of the *schlemiel* to tame the wilderness. Nonetheless, Woody Allen’s acute urbanism cannot be attributed exclusively to his Jewish background, since the entire tradition of New York literature tends to manifest similar antipathy for the bucolic. This worshipping attitude towards the urban space as the only

⁷⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 64.

⁷¹ David Brauner. *Post-War Jewish Fiction. Ambivalence, Self-Explanation and Transatlantic Connections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 74.

⁷² Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction*, 75.

environment propitious for life reminds, for instance, of the *New York School* of poetry, and especially of Frank O'Hara: "I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life."⁷³

"Allen's treatment of New York is clearly an *overtly* subjective one"⁷⁴, writes Graham McCann, and this subjectivism makes room for a wide variety of representations. In Woody Allen's fiction, the city space is only explored through the projections of the main character or the narrator's consciousness. For example, "No Kaddish for Weinstein" is an exercise in introspective self-absorption, an anti-epiphany. Here, the city space represents a pretext for Mr. Weinstein to contemplate and agonize over his empty, wasted existence, without the slightest hope to find meaning in life. As the title suggests, Weinstein does not even have the slightest hope of being remembered after his death⁷⁵. He is not the anxious quester after certainty, but the surrenderer who lost his entire motivation to continue the search. Weinstein is haunted by his out-worn self-image, his tribulations, exclusion, marginalization, and sexual dysfunctions, wandering around an unresponsive, rapacious world, which transforms into a projection of his inner coil: "Some city. Chaos everyplace"⁷⁶. On the other hand, on a larger scale, his rational representation of space points

⁷³ Frank O'Hara. "Meditations in an Emergency." 1997. Poets.org. From the Academy of American Poets. Online. Accessed on 23 June 2012

⁷⁴ Graham McCann. *Woody Allen: New Yorker*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 30. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁵ The Kaddish is a Jewish prayer recited by close relatives when mourning someone's death. In the text, Weinstein is divorced and has no children and therefore, no one to recite the Kaddish for him.

⁷⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 118.

towards external constructs being assimilated into the individual's own system of beliefs. His rational mapping of the world ironically alludes to propagandist discourses such as the Zionist discourse, and it is articulated in the discussion he has with his former wife:

"We never faced reality."

"It wasn't my fault. You said it was north."

"Reality is north, Ike."

"No, Harriet. Empty dreams are north. Reality is west. False hopes are east, and I think Louisiana is south."⁷⁷

The characters and the city interrelate through a symbiotic interface, which manifests on a metaphorical and psychological, as well as a material level, and allows for confusing projections and identifications. Woody Allen's short fiction can be read as comic exaggeration of urban experience, a travesty of the upper-middle class sophisticated society. For example, the narrator of "Yes, but Can the Steam Engine Do This?," contemplates the New York skyline and indulges in profound meditation, while waiting for Joseph K.⁷⁸, his beagle, "to emerge from his regular Tuesday fifty-minute hour with a Park Avenue therapist – a Jungian veterinarian who, for fifty dollars per session, labors valiantly to convince him that jowls are not a social drawback"⁷⁹. The narrator confessed: "[m]y eyes became moist as I looked out the window at the shimmering towers of the city, and I experienced a sense of eternity, marveling at man's ineradicable place in the universe"⁸⁰. It only takes the opening paragraph for Woody Allen to capture the versatile hypostasis of the city and the multifaceted nature of

⁷⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 120.

⁷⁸ Also the name of the main character in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

⁷⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 177.

⁸⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 177.

city life. The overwhelming magnificence of the New York skyline, which arouses the individual's desire to immerse into the pathetic contemplation of life and eternity, is unexpectedly and irrevocably undercut by the decayed and corrupt city life. Canine psychotherapy as a treatment for natural features becomes the marker of a distorted sense of urban sophistication. The ridicule of the shallowness of city life is reinforced by the amusing allusion to its exaggerated emphasis on appearance, which can cause depression even in dogs. What is even more disturbing (while also a source of the comic effect) than the association of these two extremely different perspectives is the sense of normality by which they overlap, most likely a tribute to Kafka, with whose novel *The Trial* Allen attempts an intertextual dialogue. Allen's text shares in the Kafkian absurdist universe, while simultaneously employing its mechanisms as part of his parodic strategies.

The New York of Woody Allen's short fiction resonates with the characters and transforms to accommodate their every need, their every moral or psychological flaw. In "Glory Hallelujah, Sold!"⁸¹ the city's "spiritual dimension" seems to have considerably intensified. The city got abreast with the time and prayers became one of the most popular products sold on the internet auction site, eBay. The narrator tells the story of his experience as a psalm scrivener, working for Holy Moe Bottomfeeder, the Prayer Jockey, and explains how principles and values bend and change when one finds himself at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid of needs:

⁸¹ "Glory Hallelujah, Sold!", as well as other texts discussed in this section, has not been published in *The New Yorker*. However, they are relevant to understanding Allen's fictional representation of urbanity, which he brought into the pages of the magazine.

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Integrity is a relative concept, best left to the penetrating minds of Jean-Paul Sartre or Hannah Arendt. The reality is, when winter winds howl and the only affordable dwelling shapes up as a cardboard carton on Second Avenue, principles and lofty ideals have a tendency to vanish in a whirlpool down the bathroom plumbing ...⁸²

The spirit of the city is nourished by the dynamics between low and high but, in its most pragmatic representation, high ideals and philosophical principles collapse under the imperative of physiological needs. By providing information about the most required prayers, the narrator of “Glory Hallelujah, Sold!” stresses the contamination of values in a society dominated by commodity fetishism, where “the culture of the simulacrum comes to *life*” and “where exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced”⁸³. Woody Allen writes:

We got prayers for health, for love problems, for that raise you want, the new Maserati, maybe a little rain if you’re a rube – and of course the ponies, the point spread, and our hottest item: ‘O Heavenly Father, Lord God of hosts, let me abide in the kingdom of glory forever and, just once hit the lottery – oh, and Lord, the Megaball.’⁸⁴

The priorities of life are dictated by material and financial aspects, which come to dictate social status that is to be protected at all costs. The need for status and the frivolities of a materialistic culture find their articulation in “Nanny Dearest”, which tells the story of a well-off Park Avenue couple who find themselves in danger of having all their shortcomings and character flaws

⁸² Allen, Woody. *Mere Anarchy*. 2nd edition. London: Edbury Press, 2008, 77.

⁸³ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London & New York: Verso, 1991, 14.

⁸⁴ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 77.

exposed by the book the nanny of their children was writing. Such a crisis calls for extreme measures and plotting a murder seems to be the best way to deal with the situation.

In "The Rejection", another Manhattan family goes through tremendous distress because their three-year-old son, Mischa, has been rejected "by the very best nursery school in Manhattan"⁸⁵, although his father, Boris Ivanovich, made every effort to support his son's admission: "I greased everybody, from teachers to the window washer, and still the kid couldn't hack it"⁸⁶. Apparently, this rejection caused the family the greatest misfortune imaginable because it has taken away the child's opportunity of ever being accepted to a higher education institution and has also completely ruined the parents' reputation, confining them to social marginalization for the rest of their lives. In "The Rejection," Woody Allen's social commentary acquires new strength and targets the excessive hysteria over the importance of the preparations necessary to be accepted to an Ivy League college. But, as is always the case with Woody Allen's texts, there is more than a single target. He parodically turns the entire affair into a 'great Russian tragedy' set in New York, by mixing the style of the nineteenth-century Russian novel with the consumerist American environment, thus following a specific postmodernist recipe. All the characters in the short story have Russian names and every small action gains mock-monumental dimension. Anna Ivanovich, Mischa's mother, reacts histrionically to the disastrous event. She blames herself for the misfortune and interprets the rejection as a divine punishment for having bought too many pairs of Prada shoes. The excessively dramatic story ends in a didactic manner,

⁸⁵ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 93.

⁸⁶ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 93.

with a mock-epiphany. The Ivanovich family ends up living in a shelter for the homeless and Boris tells Anna: “I now believe in something ... I believe there is meaning in life and that all people, rich and poor, will eventually dwell in the City of God, because Manhattan is definitely getting unlivable”⁸⁷.

The thin line between high class and low life is easily crossed. Absurd events can throw people on one side or the other without them having any control over it. What happened to Boris and Anna Ivanovich is not a singular case. Dr. Ossip Parkis, the narrator of “A Lunatic’s Tale”, a former successful surgeon, underwent a similar process. He begins his story by recounting how his life changed from “living on the upper East Side, gadding about town in a brown Mercedes, and bedecked dashingly in a varied array of Ralph Lauren tweeds”⁸⁸ and how he became “what is popularly referred to as ‘a New York street crazy,’ pausing at trash cans to fill my shopping bags with bits of string and bottle caps”⁸⁹. His story does not involve any official rejections, but a series of romantic failures caused by his own emotional dysfunctions. The complexity of the urban environment is emphasized by the juxtaposing oppositional perspectives: the monumental structures of the skyline, which testifies to the sophistication and luxury the city can offer to its inhabitants, harbors a dark side, which generally surfaces in response to the characters’ alienation and emotional misery. By insisting on the details of what city life is supposed to be (naming the exact brands of luxury goods and associating them with specific spatial coordinates), Woody Allen dramatizes the power of commodity

⁸⁷ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 98.

⁸⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 379.

⁸⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 379.

and plays it against the inner realities of the individual subject, thus aligning his writing to Jameson's description of a world in which "material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect"⁹⁰.

Similar to Allen's films, the New York of his short fiction is also home to "beautiful women and street-smart guys who seemed to know all the angles"⁹¹. The city always sets itself up as the most appropriate environment for the smart detectives to utter their punchy dialogue lines. Inspector Ford from "Match Wits with Inspector Ford" has once been confronted with a case which interfered with New York's urban planning. He was working a kidnapping case when he saw the ransom note which said: "Dear Mom and Dad, Leave \$50,000 in a bag under the bridge on Decatur Street. If there is no bridge on Decatur Street, please build one ... This is no joke. I am enclosing a joke so you will be able to tell the difference"⁹². In "Mr. Big", Allen's famous detective, Kaiser Lupowitz is hired by a long-haired blonde, to find God. His search makes him travel all around New York, from Danny's Billiards on Tenth Avenue, all the way to Newark to an Italian restaurant where he met the Pope, but he has done most of his thinking at O'Rourke's. Through Kaiser Lupowitz's itinerary, Woody Allen maps New York for an existentialist quest and emphasizes that the contemporary urban reality can only give one answer to the major theological question of humanity: God has been killed.

Another important case that comes to detective Lupowitz's attention in "The Whore of Mensa" involves blackmail: Mr. Word

⁹⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 24.

⁹¹ *Manhattan*. By Woody Allen and Marshall Brickam. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Woody Allen, Diane Keaton and Mariel Hemingway. United Artists. 1979. Film.

⁹² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 80.

Babcock is blackmailed by Flossie, the madam who manages a call-girl service offering exclusivist intellectual services. When Kaiser Lupowitz finds their headquarters in the Hunter College Book Store, the twentieth-century metropolitan space opens to include a Victorian scenery, with secret doors masked by walls of books, sofas, and “red flocked wallpaper”⁹³, where he finds pale and nervous call-girls, resembling Victorian prudes. The interlocking of the two spaces in the short story is underpinned by the cliché of the educated and intellectually elevated Victorian society as well as by the much-appreciated postmodernist literary tendency of revisiting the Victorian cultural heritage. It also brings into discussion Victorian sexuality. The Victorian society witnessed the enforcement of a moral and puritan attitude as an attempt to repudiate triviality and the questionable mentality of the Regency. Nevertheless, this censorship also had side effects as, according to Jan Marsh, “a hypocritical ‘shadow side’ to this public denial was glimpsed, in the ‘secret world’ of Victorian prostitution and pornography, and more openly in the ‘naughty nineties’”⁹⁴. Besides the blooming of prostitution, the controlling discourse referring to the incompatibility between sexual appetite and “mental distinction” correlated with the claim that “procreation impaired artistic genius”⁹⁵, reveals Allen’s premeditation in associating the two spaces.

Where there are detectives, there are also wrongdoers. “A Look at Organized Crime” is a mockumentary of the activity of the Cosa Nostra in the United States. The short story is a parody of the

⁹³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 56.

⁹⁴ Ian Marsh. “Sex & Sexuality in the 19th Century.” Victoria and Albert Museum Web site. Accessed on 07 June 2012.

⁹⁵ Marsh, “Sex & Sexuality in the 19th Century.”

popular TV series *The Untouchables*, which aired in the early sixties and tackled the fight against crime in Chicago, during the Prohibition. Woody Allen's text is a parodical representation of organized crime, structured into three main sections: a brief historical survey, a structural analysis, and a mock-didactic conclusions section. Ironically, Woody Allen chooses to juxtapose Jewish nicknames over the Italian names and aliases of the mobsters presented in the text: "Santucci's brother Gaetano (also known as Little Tony, or Rabbi Henry Sharpstein)"⁹⁶, not to mention that Vitale's fiancée, Bea Moretti, was "a showgirl and star of the hit Broadway musical *Say Kaddish*"⁹⁷.

Apart from the amusing immediate recalling of a period of New York's history romanticized by cinema, "A Look at Organized Crime" points towards an intended confusion between the Italian Cosa Nostra and the Jewish 'Kosher Nostra', as Eugene Kaellis calls it in his article about Jewish organized crime in the United States. According to Kaellis, "[i]n 1908, New York City's head cop stated that half of the city's criminals were Jews. He may have been expressing a bias, but it seems he wasn't too far off."⁹⁸ Jewish organized crime extended to several other American major cities like Las Vegas and Atlantic City and involved gambling, drugs, and alcohol smuggling during the Prohibition, thus the intended misattribution in Woody Allen's text. "A Look at Organized Crime" is another example of the postmodernist parodical use of various genres and styles. Woody Allen distorts

⁹⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 154.

⁹⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 155.

⁹⁸ Eugene Kaellis. "Jewish gangsters were once known in organized crime circles as the 'Kosher Nostra'." 19 September 2008. *Jewish Independent Web Site*. Accessed on 4 June 2012.

1. Forget the Academy Awards – He was published in *The New Yorker*

the style of propagandist documentary and uses it parodically. This idea surfaces at the beginning of the conclusions section:

Organized crime is a blight on our nation. While many young Americans are lured into a career of crime by its promise of an easy life, most criminals actually must work long hours, frequently in buildings without airconditioning. Identifying criminals is up to each of us.⁹⁹

In its realistic manifestations, the urban space of Woody Allen's short fiction bears a double valence. In some short stories, such as "No Kaddish for Weinstein", it is used to emphasize the characters' neurosis and anxieties, the emptiness and the hopelessness of their lives. It supports their moral conundrums and transforms according to their emotional and psychological torments and dysfunctions. The urban space is also used for sheer social satire. Through the examination of society, reflected in the deep analysis of personal issues, Woody Allen manages to capture the texture of urban American life. He discloses and ridicules the mores of a decayed society that cannot offer individuals any grand values on which to underpin their existence. However, the magnificence of the city still shows in the inhabitants' sophistication and intellectualism; bookstores, libraries, concert halls and museums nurture their intellectual fetishism, while the streets, restaurants, and bars create an atmosphere that fuels their musings on the most profound aspects of human existence.

The author's affection for the city surfaces through his insistence on naming streets and places and setting clear trajectories for his characters, thus establishing a direct connection with the targeted readership of his short stories: the readers of *The New Yorker*. For example, in "Examining Psychic Phenomena", the

⁹⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 156.

spirit of Mr. Albert Sykes, bored to death by a discussion about mutual funds, starts wandering around the city. This is a pretext for Woody Allen to map a 'spiritual' tour of New York, transforming it into a labyrinthine space signed with landmarks that bear emotional value:

My spirit then returned to my body and sat for another twenty minutes or so, hoping nobody would suggest charades. When the conversation turned to mutual funds, it left again and began wandering around the city. I am convinced that it visited the Statue of Liberty and then saw the stage show at Radio City Music Hall. Following that, it went to Benny's Steak House and ran up a tab of sixty-eight dollars. My spirit then decided to return to my body, but it was impossible to get a cab. Finally, it walked up Fifth Avenue and rejoined me just in time to catch the late news.¹⁰⁰

Woody Allen's short stories have an urban setting and, in most cases, it is easily recognizable as New York. Woody Allen's short fiction brims over with humorous but nonetheless deeply cutting approaches to what he portrays as a travesty of elite society. Most often, in the construction of the urban space, he chooses to work with an imbricate structure of opposite perspectives that captures the complexity of the urban experience, thus fitting his fictional universe into the thematic sphere demarcated by *The New Yorker's* fiction editors.

1.2.2. "a comic tradition onto himself"

The quintessential trait of Woody Allen's work springs from his comic talent and, as Renée Curry remarked, "[a]fter working year in and year out for four decades, Woody Allen has become a comic

¹⁰⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 17.

tradition unto himself”¹⁰¹. Vittorio Hösle goes so far as to assign the credit for the reinstatement of comedy as high art to Woody Allen. In Hösle’s words, “[o]ne can even defend the thesis that Woody Allen recovers the fullness of the comic that had been lost by high art – of course with exceptions such as Rabelais and, in some of his plays, Shakespeare – for more than two millennia”¹⁰². Hösle defends Allen’s position in the long Western tradition of humorous writing, dating back to Ancient Greece. Hösle builds his case arguing that Allen’s comic writing responds to ideological tensions similar to those that fueled the comedy of Aristophanes. As Hösle explains,

Allen's type of comedy is markedly different from the New Comedy that developed in Hellenism and through Roman comedy influenced European comedies till the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is much closer to Aristophanes than to Menander, Plautus, and Terence. Why? The main reason seems to me that both Aristophanes and Allen are contemporaries of the dissolution of a religion that for centuries had been the basis of their culture—Greek polytheism and Judaic-Christian monotheism respectively. Allen makes fun of God with the same ease with which Aristophanes made jokes about the Greek gods, and both have been allowed to do so because the intellectuals of their time did or do something analogous. In times of ideological uncertainty comedy may share the task of questioning, together with the philosophers, the basic convictions of the age. [...] Comedy becomes thus inevitably more philosophical. [...] Both are at their core moralists, and they feel threatened by a form of intellectualism that they regard as empty and subversive ... ¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Renée R. Curry. “Woody Allen: The Artist as Worker.” *Perspectives on Woody Allen*. Ed. Renée R Curry. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996. 3-18, 7.

¹⁰² Hösle, *Woody Allen*, 7.

¹⁰³ Hösle, *Woody Allen*, 84-85. Hösle’s work relies on the analysis of Allen’s films, but he included some short stories from *Getting Even* and *Side Effects* in the discussion.

In a more immediate context, the humor of Woody Allen's short fiction¹⁰⁴ positions him in the lineage of *The New Yorker's* best humorous writers. As Sanford Pinsker noted, "scholars need not break a sweat to establish Allen's lineage to the Little Man of Robert Benchley, to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, indeed, to a host of precursors from the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine"¹⁰⁵. This comic persona characterized by fallibility and by his inability to cope with an overbearing environment is, in Maurice Yacowar's opinion, the key to Woody Allen's success since it lays out "his private fears and failures,"¹⁰⁶ thus creating a sense of intimacy with the audience and the readership he addresses.

Woody Allen uses this distinctive persona and his comic talent to transform everything, from major philosophical, ontological, and theological questions, suicide attempts, emotional cravings, crises, and psychological disorders to social conventions, family relationships, sexual desires, quotidian affairs, and physiological aspects, into humorous material. Woody Allen's texts are abundant with jokes that win over the reader, but which can also turn, at times, into potential weaknesses. The humorous richness of his short fiction relates it to his stand-up comedian days and also recalls Roger Angell's above-mentioned remark about Woody Allen's fiction being "too funny."¹⁰⁷ His ebullient humor manifests both at the level of the architecture of his phrases, as well as in the construction of the narrative, and penetrates the formal

¹⁰⁴ Most studies tackling Woody Allen's short fiction investigate the strategies of humor he employs.

¹⁰⁵ Sanford Pinsker. *The Schlemiel as Metaphor. Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel*. Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971, 163.

¹⁰⁶ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Angell quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

level of his deft mixing of discourses and genres. Woody Allen's writing style is patterned with non sequiturs, stylistic *mélanges*, paradoxical combinations, and logical disruptions which make it easy to generate smiles and laughs out of every phrase or, at least, every paragraph.

The ludicrous descent from the lofty, the sophisticated, and the highly philosophical to the ordinary, the physiological, and the trivial covers a wide leeway, ranging from the smallest details of individual experience to summing up an entire social wave and to major metaphysical concerns. For example, the second section of "My Philosophy" is entitled "Eschatological Dialectics as a Means of Coping with Shingles." The subtitle itself ridicules and trivializes all major theological concerns about the end of mankind through the simple association with the treatment of shingles, while also revealing the author's cynical view of the mystical and religious doctrines of the final destiny of humankind and the final judgment. The entire section reinforces the idea promoted by the title, as the unnamed narrator meditates:

We can say that the universe consists of a substance, and this substance we will call "atoms," or else we will call it "monads." ... This, of course, does not explain why the soul is immortal. Nor does it say anything about an afterlife, or about the feeling my Uncle Sender has that he is being followed by Albanians.¹⁰⁸

In only one paragraph, Woody Allen dismisses and trivializes both Leibniz' and Democritus' philosophical systems and renders them irrelevant and useless both against the metaphysical challenge of proving the soul's immortality and against the mundane problems of a good nephew, preoccupied with the schizophrenic persecutory delusions that distort Uncle Sender's sense of reality. In the final

¹⁰⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 171.

section of "My Philosophy" entitled "Aphorisms" Woody Allen carries on disparaging major theological concerns and grand philosophical matters which he exposes by means of vulgar simplification. Woody Allen writes: "Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you're dressed for it"¹⁰⁹. Metaphysics is here trivialized by the association with social etiquette and its reliance on appearance.

These unexpected shifts and logical distortions become the recognition markers that the audience and the readership have come to instantly associate with Woody Allen. He explores the most troublesome aspects of human existence in the most hilarious manner and achieves the humorous effect through the design of his phrases, based on the yoking of opposites. Maurice Charney argues that Woody Allen's favorite strategy for creating comic effects is the non sequitur, which he defines as a type of association which "plays with the possibility of a logical link that isn't really there"¹¹⁰. In the specific case of Woody Allen, Charney claims that the non sequitur is "a free associational, spontaneous kind of humor preoccupied with certain metaphysical themes" and that "these portentous themes are deflated by a very materialistic and practical conclusion that may have little or nothing to do literally with the original proposition"¹¹¹. Woody Allen treats the script of the jokes with great care and, although unexpected, his non sequiturs are not completely random. Existentialist concerns come up in Woody Allen's fiction with a self-propelled intensity which is always diluted by the trivializing effect of the non sequiturs. A logical reconnection, however twisted, is still possible and results

¹⁰⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 173. Vittorio Hösle provides an insightful reading of this sentence. See Hösle, *Woody Allen*, 34-45.

¹¹⁰ Charney, "Woody Allen's non sequiturs", 340.

¹¹¹ Charney, "Woody Allen's non sequiturs", 347.

in comic effects. This technique allows Allen to avoid pathetic seriousness and to attenuate the gravity of the existential concerns he engages in his short fiction.

While the plots of his short stories are rarely amusing in themselves, Woody Allen succeeds in transforming even the most tragic event into comic material. In *The Language of Comic Narratives*, Isabel Ermida identifies a set of five principles¹¹² a text has to respect in order to be considered humorous and applies them to Woody Allen's short story "The Lunatic's Tale" in order to identify the mechanisms behind Woody Allen's power to transform the most unfortunate situations of the individual's life into comic narratives. Ermida concludes that Allen's comic narrative is "not limited to being a chain of independent joke-like structures"¹¹³, but that the discursive organization of humor relies on a complex strategy involving the interaction of supra-scripts, the interplay between stimulating the reader to infer the course of the narrative and deflating the reader's expectations, the presence of the unsaid, conveyed through allusions and presuppositions, and a series of "clues, obstacles, and traps laid out by the author" which turn out to be "a strategy of making the reader succeed in solving the text and enjoying its reward: amusement"¹¹⁴. Isabel Ermida pursues a similar quest in her study "'Losers, poltroons and nudniks' in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*" where she explores the semantic and stylistic mechanisms Woody Allen uses for the comic incongruity which transforms human failure and the wide

¹¹² The five principles Isabel Ermida discusses are: *Principle of Opposition*, *Principle of Hierarchy*, *Principle of Recurrence*, *Principle of Informativeness*, and the *Principle of Cooperation*. See Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives*, 172-173.

¹¹³ Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives*, 204.

¹¹⁴ Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives*, 205.

range of assorted negative emotions into comic material. Based on Isabel Ermida's research, we can conclude that Woody Allen's comic power resides in his ability to master and blend a series of complex linguistic mechanisms and humorous devices and that his humorous texts, although influenced by the legacy of his stand-up comedy days, are not just a long string of jokes.

The underlayer of Isabel Ermida's research, that is, her analysis of how negative emotions and experiences are transformed into comic material points to another important aspect of Woody Allen's humor. Woody Allen's comedy always attenuates the anxiety associated with the futile nature of existence and the pain residing in his acute sense of evanescence. Confining the fear of death to an aesthetic realm protected by humor renders it more manageable. This mechanism of palliating the threat of human mortality through humor links Woody Allen's work to that of his predecessors from *The New Yorker*. As Sanford Pinsker noted, "[l]ike Benchley, like Thurber, like Perelman, Allen cannot recount his complicated griefs without making them seem comic"¹¹⁵. Moreover, this trait of Woody Allen's comedy also relates his work to that of the tradition of Jewish humor, an aspect which will be explored in-depth in the last chapter of this book.

1.2.3. Not for "the old lady from Dubuque"

Another important aspect of Woody Allen's short fiction, which links it to the tradition of *The New Yorker* short story, is its rich erudition. The magazine has always encouraged highly erudite references which should go beyond the power of understanding of

¹¹⁵ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 168.

“the old lady from Dubuque”¹¹⁶, and prided itself on its intellectualism, as a marker of sophistication. Woody Allen’s texts are highly intellectual and spiced with highbrow allusions. Reading Allen’s short stories often feels like navigating a minefield of erudite references. As James M. Wallace put it, Allen’s short fiction is “a literary mousetrap, inviting educated readers to nibble at an appetizing and complex work of literature and ensnaring pretentious academics ... The problem, of course, is in knowing exactly what springs the trap”¹¹⁷.

Oddly enough, Woody Allen pretends to be unaware of the high degree of erudition required on the part of his readers. In a discussion with Eric Lax, he downplays the importance of highbrow allusions in his texts by saying: “I want people to read my stories without the slightest investment of intellect and laugh. ... I don’t want them to have to read through two paragraphs of erudite references. I want them to start laughing almost immediately”¹¹⁸. Indeed, readers start laughing immediately, but intellectuals laugh much better. There are, of course, some texts in which the intellectual reference only sustains a specific joke, but missing the reference would not jeopardize the entire text. For example, in “No Kaddish for Weinstein,” Woody Allen writes: “He had been a precocious child. An intellectual. At twelve, he had translated the poems of T. S. Eliot into English, after some vandals had broken into the library and translated them into French”¹¹⁹. Even if the readers do not know T. S. Eliot, they can still assume

¹¹⁶ The phrase used by Harold Ross in the prospectus of *The New Yorker* (see Yagoda, *About Town*, 39), also mentioned and discussed in the previous section.

¹¹⁷ Wallace, “The Mousetrap”, 72.

¹¹⁸ Allen quoted in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, 221.

¹¹⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 115-116.

that translating poems at the age of twelve is fairly uncommon. Knowledge of T. S. Eliot's work and the length of his poems might add to the admiration for such a translation, but given the resonance of the name, the readers can infer that those poems have actually been written in English, whence the redundancy of the translation and the first humorous touch. The vandals' profanation of Mr. Weinstein's early work reinforces the humoristic effect because it activates a highly implausible course of action and, at the same time, alludes to the sensitivity of the intellectual whose work had been tampered with. Although Mr. Weinstein's personal history is described using references to British literature, missing out on the reference can be compensated by means of logical deduction and does not jeopardize the entire meaning of the text. However, in most cases, erudite references are crucial to Woody Allen's texts. For example, one of Woody Allen's best-known short stories, "The Kugelmass Episode" cannot be appreciated unless the reader is familiar with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and with the notion of bovarism. Moreover, the humorous effect of the ending depends on the reader's being familiar with Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and with theories of the consumerist society. A text like "But Soft... Real Soft" is a lost cause for a reader who is not familiar with the debate on the contested authorship of William Shakespeare's plays, and with authors such as Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, or Ben Jonson and Samuel Johnson. The reading of "A Twenties Memory" requires knowledge about the European and American modernists. Also, as James M. Wallace points out,

"Sing, You Sacher Tortes" would be unintelligible to a reader unfamiliar with the geography, history, and culture of New York City, and with sideshows, gangster lore, Jewish history, Yiddish, Las Vegas lounge acts, the theater, modern physics, the fashion

1. Forget the Academy Awards – He was published in *The New Yorker* industry, French grooming products, Viennese pastries, cigars – and probably much more ...¹²⁰

Often, Woody Allen inserts references into his texts that only New Yorkers would understand, thus creating a sense of complicity between his short fiction and his targeted readership and simultaneously reinforcing the pretense of exclusivity characteristic of New York, for, as Adler and Feinman noted,

New York City is a place that, more than once, has threatened to secede from New York State. Very likely. They'd like to secede from the Union, as well. They're a unique people, tough and funny. Workers. Wisecrackers. Ironic and mean and tender all at the same time. It's what you get when you cross Middle-European peasants with robber barons and let the mixture ferment. You get Barbara Streisand. You get Benny and Berle and Youngman and Sam Goldwin and Charlie Feldman and, oh, just everybody. You get Woody Allen.¹²¹

The richness of Woody Allen's erudite references is overwhelming. It is part of the piquancy of his style and places his writing in the elitist realm of highbrow entertainment. His texts continuously challenge the reader to decipher the allusions, make connections, and dig deeper for new layers of signification. Thus, aesthetic pleasure is often replaced with the satisfaction resulting from piecing together the puzzle of references and allusions. Shared background knowledge is a prerequisite for humor and, even more so, for intellectual jokes. Nevertheless, the challenge does not end with recognizing the reference, but continues with the even more stimulating intellectual exercise of connecting the dots. As James M. Wallace notes, the complexity of Woody Allen's

¹²⁰ Wallace, "The Mousetrap", 70.

¹²¹ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 74.

short fiction goes far beyond the literal layer and invites the reader's mind to ceaselessly forge for meaning. In James M. Wallace's words,

For a reader without a brain like Allen's, even a complete liberal arts education and a good search engine are only partially helpful in disentangling his work. He demands much more than simply recognizing allusions and references; there's difficult mental work to be done – the work of interpreting beyond literal level – and the possibilities appear endless.¹²²

This ceaseless intellectual teasing is not enough, though. Woody Allen also indulges in ridiculing intellectual sophistication and often exposes it as pseudo-intellectualism. In "No Kaddish for Weinstein" he writes: "Adelman, his friend who used to play dreidel with him on Rush Street, had studied driving at the Sorbonne. He could handle a car beautifully and had already driven many places by himself"¹²³. Woody Allen's irony targets academic snobbishness when he infers that even driving can only be learned at a prestigious high education institution, such as the Sorbonne.

By mocking (pseudo)intellectual sophistication and academic snobbery, Woody Allen indirectly pokes fun at his readers. As David Galef points out, in his short fiction, "Allen's *idée fixe* is the cerebral at war with itself, an intellectual attack on the overly intellectual"¹²⁴. He claims that "Allen's academic pastiches"¹²⁵ represent a form of criticism that parodies academic discourse as it developed in the Sixties and the Seventies.

¹²² Wallace, "The Mousetrap", 70-71.

¹²³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 115.

¹²⁴ Galef, "Getting Even", 148.

¹²⁵ Galef, "Getting Even", 150.

1. Forget the Academy Awards – He was published in *The New Yorker*

Indeed, most of Woody Allen's texts are designed as intellectual games, but this predisposition of his escalates in "The Whore of Mensa." In this short story, Woody Allen goes beyond his usual intellectual flirtation with the reader and organizes his text as a parodical assault which exposes the excessive appetite for erudite discussions as fetishist practice. In "The Whore of Mensa" he imagines a world where fine gentlemen look for intellectual entertainment offered by educated call girls. The whores of Mensa sell pleasurable intellectual and emotional experiences as follows:

For fifty bucks, I learned, you could "relate without getting close." For a hundred, a girl would lend you her Bartok records, have dinner, and then let you watch while she had an anxiety attack. For one-fifty, you could listen to FM radio with twins. For three bills, you got the works: A thin Jewish brunette would pretend to pick you up at the Museum of Modern Art, let you read her master's, get you involved in a screaming quarrel at Elaine's over Freud's conception of women, and then fake a suicide of your choosing - the perfect evening, for some guys.¹²⁶

The overlap between intellectual fetishism and sexuality is rendered visible on the surface level of the text, as the narrative revolves around a blackmail case orchestrated by Flossie, the madam who manages the call-girls service, against a man whose wife fails to fulfill his intellectual cravings. The dialogues are designed so as to support the scenario of discussions about sexual affairs. For example, Word Babcock, the subject of the blackmail, tells detective Kaiser Lupowitz: "See, I need a woman who's mentally stimulating, Kaiser. And I'm willing to pay for it. I don't want an involvement – I want a quick intellectual experience, then

¹²⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 56.

I want the girl to leave. Christ, Kaiser, I'm a happily married man"¹²⁷.

While traditional theories of fetishism¹²⁸ define it as a type of sexual perversion in which sexual desire and sexual pleasure are dependent upon an object whose intended purpose is replaced, through synecdoche, with a sexual purpose, Woody Allen operates a major shift and moves the focus from the object to the ritual. In "The Whore of Mensa," the fetishist practice does not involve the material object, the book, or the work of art, but shifts towards the erudite discussion and the intellectual or artistic experience.

In *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*, Christopher Kocela analyzes the manifold manifestations of fetishism in late-twentieth-century American literature and explores novels, essays, and short stories by Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Ishmael Reed, Tim O'Brien, John Hawkes, and Robert Coover. Kocela contends that these authors revisit and redefine fetishism as "a strategy for expressing social and political discontent, and for diagnosing historical and cultural trends particular to the second half of the twentieth century"¹²⁹. Kocela

¹²⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 52.

¹²⁸ Charles de Brosses introduces the term *fetish* in his 1760 book, *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* where he describes it as a form of religious practice based on the worshipping of animals and inanimate objects. The term expands its connotations in the nineteenth century when Karl Marx defines and elaborates on *commodity fetishism*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term starts being used in psychoanalysis to describe deviant sexual practices. The first to describe *sexual fetishism* is Jean-Martin Charcot, but the term itself is only used by his disciple, Alfred Binet, and gains popularity through the work of Sigmund Freud.

¹²⁹ Christopher Kocela. *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 4.

claims that these authors insist on the fetishist disavowal as defined by Freud, which allows the fetishist to understand and simultaneously refuse a traumatic reality. Nevertheless, fetishism loses the quality of inoffensive and domesticated sexual perversion assigned by the Freudian theory and becomes a form of social subversion used to challenge “contemporary ideological fantasy”¹³⁰.

Although Woody Allen’s “The Whore of Mensa” is not among the texts investigated by Christopher Kocela, it aligns with this trend of late-twentieth-century American fiction. “The Whore of Mensa” redefines the strategies of fetishist practices and reinforces their subversive potential for the diagnosis and the exposure of socio-cultural practices that verge on pathology. Allen’s text ridicules the exaggerated appetite for erudition as a deviant social practice and, at the same time, exposes the ostentatious parade of intellectualism as a marker of class affiliation. From this perspective, Woody Allen’s reinterpretation of fetishism brings it closer to Jean Baudrillard’s theory, which draws on the theory of Karl Marx and approaches fetishism in terms of social semiotics, as a mediator of social value. Thus, intellectualism and erudition (or pseudo-intellectualism and the pretense of erudition) become the markers of the elite class, of belonging to a sophisticated metropolitan group characterized by the need to escape the mediocrity of quotidian life. Moreover, the association between the fetishistic ritual and intellectual experiences which revolve around art, literature, and philosophy, can be seen as a derivation of Baudrillard’s theory on the understanding of aesthetic value against the general trends of consumer society. According to Baudrillard, “art should not seek

¹³⁰ Kocela, *Fetishism*, 4.

its salvation in critical denial [...], but it should go farther in formal and fetishized abstraction, in the fantasy of exchange value becoming more commoditized than commodities"¹³¹.

Humor and intellectualism help Woody Allen's short fiction conform to the de-sentimentalization requirements of *The New Yorker*, as both laughter and over-intellectualization inhibit sentimental and pathetic reactions. Woody Allen's writing is devoid of sentimental contemplation and is meant to stimulate the intellect, even when it appears to be exploring human emotions. Although Allen engages in the exploration of romantic relationships, he always controls the excess of feeling through reason and humor. For example, in "The Early Essays" he writes: "Is it better to be the lover or the loved one? Neither, if your cholesterol is over six hundred"¹³². What promises to be a debate on romantic relationships falls in the realm of the trivial and the physiological. This descent from the exalted to the common and the mundane, a technique discussed in the previous sub-section, serves to balance the emotional content of experience and stirs an intellectual rather than an emotional response to comedy.

Woody Allen's short fiction also respects the clarity requirements of *The New Yorker* fiction editors. His texts are easy to read and rarely challenge the reader with ambiguities. Nevertheless, as seen in the above discussion on the overwhelming erudition of his short fiction, the understanding of his texts would often require reading the entire humanities section of a library, and a few more books of science. Still, the complete clarity and the

¹³¹ Jean Baudrillard. "Simulation and Transaesthetics: Towards the Vanishing Point of Art." *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 5.2. 2008. Online. Accessed on 1 November 2012.

¹³² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 63.

absolute objectivity promoted by *The New Yorker* are sometimes twisted and turned against themselves in a mock-surrealist loop. Indeed, Woody Allen likes to indulge in playful experimentation and the lines between the realistic and the surreal or the fantastical are often erased. Woody Allen often juxtaposes a rich sense of the grotesque with an acute sense of the comical and creates exaggerated characters and situations. For example, in “The UFO Menace,” Woody Allen writes:

A typical “explained” incident is the one reported by Sir Chester Ramsbottom, on June 5, 1961, in Shropshire: “I was driving along the road at 2 A.M. and saw a cigar-shaped object that seemed to be tracking my car. No matter which way I drove, it stayed with me, turning sharply at right angles. It was a fierce, glowing red, and in spite of twisting and turning the car at high speed I could not lose it. I became alarmed and began sweating. I let out a shriek of terror and apparently fainted, but awoke in a hospital, miraculously unharmed.” Upon investigation, experts determined that the “cigar-shaped object” was Sir Chester's nose. Naturally, all his evasive actions could not lose it, since it was attached to his face.¹³³

The disruption and the distortion of the real through comic-grotesque metamorphoses result in the rearrangement of the structures of meaning, based on the association between the bizarre, the ludicrous, and the unreal. Woody Allen exploits the darkly comic potential of this technique through a strategy of excess. His short fiction often combines the surreal with the farcical and even those texts written in the spirit of realism, still bear a strong sense of the absurd and the parodical.

Woody Allen's exploration of the absurd and the nonsensical and his appetite for breaching logic do not fully align with the initial scope of the magazine. In his investigation of the

¹³³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 328.

dynamics between Woody Allen's penchant for the absurd and for nonsensical associations and *The New Yorker's* preference for clarity, Marc S. Reisch concludes that:

The earlier generation of humor writers for the *New Yorker* subscribe to the original aims of that magazine. A prospectus of the *New Yorker* declares, 'it will hate bunk. ... its integrity will be above suspicion.' Allen's characters make bunk a virtue and entirely sidestep the question of integrity. By consistently assuming a high brow attitude, Allen's characters parody the *New Yorker* writers who had wanted to clear away the excess baggage that bunk brings in its wake.¹³⁴

Reisch's remark on the incompatibility between the original guidelines of the magazine and Woody Allen's apparent appetite for 'bunk' does bear some validity. However, the dominant trend of the magazine had undergone a series of changes over the decades and, by the time Woody Allen submitted his first piece to *The New Yorker*, the magazine had already opened up to literary experiments.

A decade before the beginning of their collaboration, *The New Yorker* would have probably frowned upon Woody Allen's short stories and casuals, but in the mid-Sixties, the magazine displayed an increased tolerance (which, in time, turned into an appetite) for experimental and surreal short fiction. In the Sixties, the editors began to appreciate the fictional possibilities opened by the postmodern matrix and therefore Woody Allen's exuberant writing fitted perfectly in the pages of the magazine. As discussed above, Woody Allen's short stories and casual pieces seem to align to a considerable degree with the requirements of the magazine's fiction editors. Moreover, as Woody Allen confessed, he thinks of

¹³⁴ Reisch, "Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist," 72.

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The New Yorker as the most appropriate venue for his short fiction. This high degree of compatibility and mutual appreciation seems to be the key to their ongoing, long-term collaboration.

1.2.4. A little Benchleyan and a little too Perelmanesque

When *The New Yorker* opened its door to Woody Allen, he followed in the steps of Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman. Indeed, Woody Allen's vivid and exuberant literary style subscribes to the lineage established by such famous American humorists, to a tradition "characterized by an energetic wit that delights in nonsense, its own cleverness, and its ability to toy with the super-serious postures attached to the high culture of Western arts and letters"¹³⁵. As Woody Allen himself admitted, the style and technique of Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman have always been an inspiration for him. In Woody Allen's words, "I'd love to write like Benchley or Perelman. I admire them both *tremendously*"¹³⁶.

Robert Benchley was one of the knights of the Algonquin Round Table, a friend of Harold Ross' and one of the most dedicated and most prolific contributors to *The New Yorker*. He started writing for *The New Yorker* in 1925 and his fiction dominated the pages of the magazine in the early Thirties. He also published a long series of theatre reviews. Robert Benchley became an iconic figure in *The New Yorker* and his opinion had remarkable weight. American writer and editor for *The New Yorker* E. B. White confessed the respect he had for Benchley's aesthetic judgment:

¹³⁵ Richard Schwartz. *Woody, From Antz to Zelig: A Reference Guide to Woody Allen's Creative Work, 1964 - 1998*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000, 109.

¹³⁶ Allen quoted in Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 173.

"[t]he day he told me that Benchley had praised something I had written was one of the big days of the Twenties for me"¹³⁷.

The professional journeys of Robert Benchley and Woody Allen bear significant similarities as both of them shaped their writing styles around the cultural pole of *The New Yorker* and both pursued careers as scriptwriters, actors, and filmmakers. Although a large number of humorists are indebted to Robert Benchley's stylistic legacy, he has never enjoyed the popularity of Woody Allen. Woody Allen is, indeed, more successful on the big screen and his comedy is far more popular, but Robert Benchley's contribution to the humorous tradition of *The New Yorker* and his influence on the evolution of American humor, in general, is of considerable importance. As Sanford Pinsker noted, Benchley "made the *New Yorker's* brand of modern humor possible in roughly the same way that Faulkner made modern writing about the South newly possible or that Bellow showed us how to write about modern Jewish-Americans"¹³⁸.

Robert Benchley is part of the college-educated generation of humorists who, according to Alan Gribben, followed in the steps of Mark Twain and exploited the benefits of higher education to the advantage of their "sophisticated styles" which "inevitably led American humor away from the rural or homely styles"¹³⁹. Alan Gribben identified a "Twain-like tone"¹⁴⁰ in the writing of Robert

¹³⁷ White quoted in Billy Altman. *Laughter's Gentle Soul: The Life of Robert Benchley*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997, 16.

¹³⁸ Sanford Pinsker. *Bearing the Bad News: Contemporary American Literature and Culture*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1990, 46.

¹³⁹ Alan Gribben. "The Importance of Mark Twain." *American Humor*. Ed. Arthur Power Dudden. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 24-49, 43.

¹⁴⁰ Gribben, "The Importance of Mark Twain", 43.

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Benchley and he claims that Benchley contributed to the consolidation of a new trend in American humor, while still preserving the legacy of Mark Twain. In Gribben's words, "Robert Benchley ... makes a superb example of the emerging mode that would become dominant, and some of his writings show an affinity with Twain's"¹⁴¹.

As Norris W. Yates explains, "the most important feature of Benchley's humor was a character-type which may be labeled the 'Little Man' ... trying unsuccessfully to cope with an environment too big and too complex for them"¹⁴². Benchley's Little Man is often used as a pretext for social satire as he is always confronted with and crushed by the institutional development of the urban environment which had become more and more domineering and less and less accessible. For example, Benchley's "Let's Go" is a mock-incentive written for Americans who might want to broaden their cultural horizon by visiting Europe. The attractiveness of the trip is continuously sabotaged by the absurdity and hostility of urban reality. Robert Benchley writes:

Passports are required because of the Great War (1914-1933) and the resulting hard feeling between nations (France). Passports are obtained by going down to the corner of Broad and Wall Street and looking around desultorily for "the passport place." If time is a factor, go directly to the corner of Pine and Nassau Streets, where you will find it in the old Assay Office. It will be closed because of holiday.

Visas are obtained by going to the various consulates, all of which will be closed for lunch. ¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Gribben, "The Importance of Mark Twain", 43.

¹⁴² Yates quoted in Gribben, "The Importance of Mark Twain", 44.

¹⁴³ Robert Benchley. "Let's Go." *The New Yorker*. 13 May 1933: 15.

Robert Benchley works with the inability of the Little Man to tame the urban reality and takes the opportunity to perform a scrutiny of the American city life. His social criticism, which can be read throughout most of his texts, aims at the American cultural myopia and backwardness. As Judith Yaross Lee noted, Benchley's social satire "criticizes American decadence"¹⁴⁴ and, at times, turns into political humor.

Woody Allen's short fiction draws from Benchley's. He continues to elaborate on the anti-heroic figure of the Little Man, but he merges this character with the Jewish stereotype of the *schlemiel* and transforms it into a specific Allen-esque character, which will be discussed in-depth in the last chapter. Woody Allen also explores the patterns of the narrative of failure emerging from the anti-hero's confrontation with the surrounding absurd reality, but takes this strategy to another level by adding a consistent philosophical underlayer. Allen often ridicules the contradictions and ambiguities of city life and engages in social criticism, viewed simultaneously as prophetic and judgmental of cultural trends, but he keeps away from political implications, "perhaps because he can see in what happened to people like Mort Stahl that political humor has no staying power"¹⁴⁵. In the end, Allen's comedy did not have to turn political, since he could find plenty of material to work with in the realm of the quotidian experience of the sophisticated urban man. More than Benchley, Allen enjoys the benefits of a more educated readership. As Sanford Pinsker noted, "he could depend on a readership that had gone to college, that had domesticated Freud and had a feel for the Kafkaesque, that had taken courses in the modern novel and seen foreign films with

¹⁴⁴ Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 268.

¹⁴⁵ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 157.

subtitles”¹⁴⁶. In short, Woody Allen could afford a much more intellectual and sophisticated comedy, with more profound philosophical implications.

According to Rolande Diot, Robert Benchley’s humorous writing often relies on surrealist and Dadaist techniques. As Diot explains, Benchley’s hyperactive imagination works towards a “rearrangement of reality in a subjective ‘surreality’”¹⁴⁷ using a series of methods he himself invented, such as “abusive classifications, heterotopian series, and the use of certain established scientific theories, revised and corrected according to his fantasy and the laws of his subjectivity”¹⁴⁸. Woody Allen’s style is also characterized by a voluntary displacement of the real, by the use of non sequiturs and sudden deviations towards different planes of existence. Both Benchley’s and Allen’s humorous strategies rely on puns, wordplay, nonsense, and incongruous juxtapositions. They both like to play with the double entendre and to exploit underlying meanings to comic ends. For example, in “Stamp Out Schistosomiasis,” a parodical casual piece emphasizing the importance of helping the Rockefeller Foundation exterminate schistosomiasis in Egypt, Robert Benchley writes:

¹⁴⁶ Pinsker, *Bearing the Bad News*, 51.

¹⁴⁷ Rolande Diot. *Humour et surréalisme chez trois humoristes du New Yorker. Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Sidney J. Perelman*. PhD Thesis. Vol. I. L’Université de Paris IV. Paris: Atelier de Reproduction des Thèses Université de Lille III, 1980, 117. My translation. In the original: « recomposition de la réalité en une “surréalité” subjective. »

¹⁴⁸ Diot, *Humour et surréalisme*, 117. My translation. In the original: « les classifications abusive, les séries hétéropique et l’utilisation de certain théories scientifiques connues, revues et corrigées selon sa fantaisie et les lois de sa subjectivité. »

These tadpoles swim around again until they find what is known as a "host." This is where the Egyptians come in. They are the most perfect hosts in the world. ... Not even the strictest rules of hospitality make it incumbent on a host to stand still and let himself eaten into by a miracidium.¹⁴⁹

Here Benchley superimposes social conventions of hospitality upon the meaning associated with 'host' in biology and wagers on semantic ambiguities to obtain comic effects. Woody Allen is often drawn by the same strategy of overlapping otherwise incompatible scripts. In "The UFO Menace" he writes:

If these objects are indeed from another planet, then the civilization that designed them must be millions of years more advanced than our own. ... Professor Leon Speciman postulates a civilization in outer space that is more advanced than ours by approximately fifteen minutes. This, he feels, gives them a great advantage over us, since they needn't rush to get to appointments.¹⁵⁰

In this case, Woody Allen plays upon the semantics of temporal clichés. First, he belittles the idea that a civilization might be far more advanced than our own by reducing the span of time generally used for comparison from millions of years to fifteen minutes, and then he plays with the academic quarter in a mock attempt to restore the advantage of such an advanced civilization.

According to Adler and Feinman, Robert Benchley was the promoter of a humorous technique he had termed "the Blind Explanation", consisting of an "answer that obfuscates twice as much as it clarifies"¹⁵¹. The "Blind Explanation" functions as an interruption of the storyline, which, instead of clarifying things, breaks the logic and functions as a nonsensical intromission. Adler

¹⁴⁹ Robert Benchley. "Stamp out Schistosomiasis." *The New Yorker*. 3 June 1933: 15.

¹⁵⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 326.

¹⁵¹ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 167.

and Feinman illustratively explain that “[y]ou can always tell you’re in the presence of Blind explanation by the urge you feel to say ‘Wha?’”¹⁵². In the above-mentioned “Stamp Out Schistosomiasis,” fragments of bracketed text make the narrator’s voice stronger and testify to his perplexity in regard to what should have been a straightforward, almost scientific discourse. Robert Benchley writes:

These flatworms, according to Dr. Barlow, who ought to know, lay their eggs, which are known as ‘miracidia,’ and they swim around until they find another snail (I may not be getting this right. It sounds a little repetitious to me). ... When the miracidia have entered the snail (I *have* got it wrong), they go through some sort of rigmarole and come out as microscopic creatures resembling a fork-tailed tadpole.¹⁵³

Adler and Feinman contend that “[t]here is little doubt that Woody has mastered this technique, after his own fashion”¹⁵⁴. Indeed, Woody Allen also exploits the humoristic benefits of this technique and his short fiction presents several examples of “Blind Explanation.” In “Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar,” he writes: “Oddly enough, Rabbi Shimmel’s own wife was said to resemble a squid, but this was only in the face, and she more than made up for it by her hacking cough – the point of which escapes me”¹⁵⁵. In “Conversations with Helmholtz,” the same technique reappears: “‘All literature is a footnote to Faust. I have no idea what I mean by that’”¹⁵⁶. Besides, Woody Allen also shares Benchley’s taste for

¹⁵² Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 167.

¹⁵³ Benchley, “Stamp out Schistosomiasis”, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 167.

¹⁵⁵ Allen, *Complete Prose*, 209.

¹⁵⁶ Allen, *Complete Prose*, 263.

disproportion and exaggeration. As Judith Yaross Lee noted, Robert Benchley's humor "tended toward hyperbole rather than irony"¹⁵⁷. Woody Allen experiments with techniques of exaggeration and often his humor becomes a strategy of the grotesque.

A line can definitely be drawn between the writing style of Robert Benchley and that of Woody Allen. Nevertheless, out of all his predecessors from *The New Yorker*, the most pervading influence on Woody Allen's short fiction is that of S. J. Perelman. When Woody Allen started his collaboration with *The New Yorker*, Roger Angell, then fiction editor, asked him to "make the piece sound a little less like Perelman"¹⁵⁸. Indeed, whenever he talks or writes about S. J. Perelman, Woody Allen's words convey a deep sense of reverence. He is the author of the "Introduction" to *The World of S. J. Perelman*, where he wrote:

Among all the comedy writers I've worked with or spoken to over the years, Perelman was always the most revered icon, the most widely-imitated comic genius and the most discouraging to any would-be funny prose stylist. For many of us, starting out years ago, it was impossible to not write like him, so dominating was his elegant voice.¹⁵⁹

Sidney Joseph Perelman, a Jewish-American writer, is an important representative of the American humorous tradition; his work influenced the development of American humor in all its forms of manifestation, from literature to stage entertainment, to radio, television, and film. S. J. Perelman is the author of the screenplay for the 1956 version of *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which brought him an Academy Award. He belonged to "the

¹⁵⁷ Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 267.

¹⁵⁸ Angell quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

¹⁵⁹ Woody Allen. "Introduction." Perelman, S. J. *The World of S.J. Perelman*. London: Prion, 2000. ix-x, ix.

school of zany anarchy and irreverent ridicule”¹⁶⁰ together with the Marx Brothers and Robert Benchley¹⁶¹ and is often credited for consolidating the tradition of surrealist humor¹⁶². He wrote scripts for the Marx Brothers which made them “plunge into gleeful nihilism”¹⁶³ due to Perelman’s view of the world as an unreasonable and chaotic place.

Although not an in-house writer, S. J. Perelman was a major contributor to *The New Yorker*. Over the years he had submitted hundreds of texts to the magazine, most of which were sketches, casuals, and short stories, but he also contributed to the “Comment” or “The Talk of the Town” sections. Perelman began his collaboration with *The New Yorker* in 1930 with “Open Letter to Moira Ransom,” a casual piece which takes the form of a letter addressed to a journalist who had written in the *Daily Mirror* that the strangest thing she had ever seen was “an intoxicating man kissing the statue of a fountain”¹⁶⁴. The letter was written by the angry man who had found “his name sprawled all over Page 1 in banner type”¹⁶⁵ and claimed that the news had greatly misrepresented the facts and

¹⁶⁰ M. Thomas Inge. “What’s So Funny About the Comics?” *American Humor*. Ed. Arthur Power Dudden. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 76-84, 84.

¹⁶¹ Perelman confessed his deep admiration for Robert Benchley. In an interview he declared: “about Benchley I am practically idolatrous”. Quoted in Norris W. Yates, *The American Humorists: Conscience of the Twentieth Century*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1964, 334.

¹⁶² See Rolande Diot, *Humour et surréalisme chez trois humoristes du New Yorker. Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Sidney J. Perelman*.

¹⁶³ Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson. “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival.” *American Humor*. Ed. Arthur Power Dudden. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 97-117, 108.

¹⁶⁴ S. J. Perelman, “Open Letter to Moira Ransom.” *The New Yorker*. 13 December 1930: 107-108, 107.

¹⁶⁵ Perelman, “Open Letter”, 107

therefore had damaged his reputation, which called for public retaliation. It appears that the man had not been not kissing the statue but had been trying to tie up a white horse (the statue) that he had seen rambling around the bushes. The letter is signed: "Yours very truly, S. J. Perelman". This technique based on the usage of fake news items or advertisements as pretexts for the story had been employed by Robert Benchley as well¹⁶⁶. At times, Woody Allen also decides to use fake pieces of journalism as material for the story. For example, "Glory Hallelujah, Sold!" begins as follows:

The internet site eBay has gained a new spiritual dimension, with a seller offering prayers for cash. The self-styled Prayer Guy, based in Co. Kildare, Ireland, is selling five prayers, with bidding for each of them starting at £1. Buyers with pressing spiritual needs can buy immediately for £5.

– Item in church newsletter, August 2005¹⁶⁷

The insertion of such mock-journalistic fragments increases the comic effect by creating the illusion of realism only to immediately crush it under the pressure of parody. This type of introduction is not very common in the short stories collected in *The Complete Prose*, but Woody Allen seems to have later developed a taste for the humorous benefits of this technique as he uses it in four out of the eighteen short stories published in his latest volume, *Mere Anarchy*. Just like Perelman, Woody Allen also enjoys breaking the ontological membrane of the fictional world by naming his first-person narrators "Allen". He does so in "Selections from the Allen Notebooks," "The Early Essays," and "My Apology."

¹⁶⁶ See "The End of the Season" published in *The New Yorker*, Jan. 2, 1926, p. 15. or "Louis Dot Dope" from April 3, 1926, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 73.

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Both S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen are writers of Jewish descent and share in the self-deprecatory tendencies of the Jewish humorous tradition. Like most Jewish-American writers, S. J. Perelman also uses Yiddish words to spice his texts. When asked, in an interview for *The Paris Review*, why he used words such as “nudnick,” “schlep,” or “tzimmes” so often in his fiction, Perelman motivates his choice by invoking the richness and subtlety of Yiddish. In S. J. Perelman’s words,

I like them for their invective content. There are nineteen words in Yiddish that convey gradations of disparagement, from a mild, fluttery helplessness to a state of downright, irreconcilable brutishness. All of them can be usefully employed to pinpoint the kind of individuals I write about.¹⁶⁸

S. J. Perelman continues the tradition of Robert Benchley’s “Little Man,” the anti-hero whose very nature prevents him from adapting to the outside world. The aggressive reality invades and corrupts the psychological balance of Perelman’s characters. Still, the author uses the exploration of the individual’s neuroses and psychoses as a pretext for pointing out the shortcomings of society. Norris W. Yates diagnosed Perelman’s Little Man with what he called “sane psychosis.” Yates contends that the psychotic obsessions and delusions of Perelman’s characters, manifested as bewildering distortions of reality and expressed through an overly dramatic rhetoric, are counterbalanced by their self-awareness and their acute sense of value. In Yates’ words,

Perelman’s wise fool might be called the Sane Psychotic in view of the fantastic images that swirl in the figure’s consciousness and

¹⁶⁸ S. J. Perelman, “The Art of Fiction No. 31”. Interview with William Cole and George Plimpton. *The Paris Review* No. 30. Summer-Fall 1963. www.theparisreview.org/interviews. Web. Accessed on 12 February 2013.

suggest insanity to the unwary reader. These aberrations plus the egotism of the Sane Psychotic make him a clown, but behind the clown's mask and among the dancing images lurk the same values found in Benchley's bumbler – integrity, sincerity, skepticism, taste, a respect for competence, a striving after the golden mean, and a longing for better communication and understanding among men.¹⁶⁹

S.J. Perelman remodels the anti-hero through a deeply personal perspective as he often associates the authorial self with the voice of the narrator, not only through the first-person narrative, but by actually referring to the fictional persona as S. J. Perelman. His comedy concentrates around the ridiculousness of humankind and he often resorted to self-ridicule and self-deprecation as a means of exposing the shortcomings of the society and the culture to which he belonged. Perelman created a fictional persona, "the cowardly hero, the elegant runt, the devil-may-care shlepper"¹⁷⁰ reminiscent of the *schlemiel* figure of the Jewish tradition. For example, in "Dr. Perelman, I Presume, Or Small-Bore in Africa: Shoot, If You Must, Past This Old Gray Head," he tells of a safari adventure in which things got tensed because of a group of "twelve hardcore Mau Mau"¹⁷¹ who had escaped detention. Although at the beginning of the story the narrator pictured himself as following in Hemingway's manly footsteps, his cowardice gave away the fraudulent heroic stance he had assumed. When asked to pick up a gun and prepare to engage the natives, he articulately negates his manhood: "'You're a man.' 'I

¹⁶⁹ Yates, *The American Humorists*, 337.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph Epstein. "Sid, You made the Prose Too Thin." *Commentary* (1987): 53-63, 59.

¹⁷¹ S. J. Perelman. "Dr. Perelman, I Presume, Or Small-Bore in Africa: Shoot, If You Must, Past This Old Gray Head." *The New Yorker*. 14 August 1954: 20-23, 23.

am not!’ I said hotly. ‘I mean, I am, but do you expect me to walk all the way across that clearing? It’s getting dark, and besides I don’t know anything about guns’”¹⁷².

Woody Allen’s fictional persona shares much of the uneasiness and the inadequacy of the same anti-hero, a combination of the Little Man and the *schlemiel*. Allen built a character that is very much aware of all the indignities he is confronted with because of the inherent self-consciousness of the *schlemiel*. The neuroses and anxieties haunting Allen’s Little Man have become emblematic of all the author’s main characters and function both as a means of exposing the flaws of society and as a way to underline the cruelty of a potentially godless universe and the ruthlessness of biological determinism. Woody Allen employs various patterns of the narrative of failure to destroy the main character’s every possible dream of glory or success. This strategy is often used for moralizing and didactic purposes. As Maurice Yacowar noted, “Allen’s comedy of mock heroism demonstrates the falseness of social codes and images that obscure man’s limits and thereby prevent his coming to term with his fate”¹⁷³.

The misfortune of Perelman’s and Allen’s anti-heroes, unable to cope with the overwhelmingly absurd reality, stems from the authors’ pessimistic view of the world. S. J. Perelman manifests the same ominously foreshadowing worldview and the apocalypse complex that also marks Woody Allen’s fictional universe. In an interview, S. J. Perelman expressed his skepticism towards humanity and his gloomy predictions about the faith of mankind: “we are all headed for extermination ... it’s only a question of when. And I have profound faith in mankind’s ability

¹⁷² Perelman, “Dr. Perelman, I Presume”, 23.

¹⁷³ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 208.

to destroy himself and the earth"¹⁷⁴. The common perspective upon reality and the view of the world as an absurd place explain the similarities between their alienated Little Men, overwhelmed and incapacitated by perpetual insecurity. As Sanford Pinsker noted when comparing the work of Woody Allen and S. J. Perelman,

... so much connective tissue springs to mind – either from the silver screen or the *New Yorker's* pages – that it begins to look as if we are talking about the subtle distinctions between the schmendrick and the shnook or, God forbid, the schlemiel and the schlimazel. They are Beautiful Losers, gentle, and somewhat cranky souls who have thrown their lot with the word rather than the fist. Each brings a controlled wackiness to the language of the printed page and a genuine instinct for the absurd to the world at large.¹⁷⁵

Woody Allen also shares S. J. Perelman's fondness of highly suggestive character names. The series initiated by Perelman's Witness Noreen Cannister, Patrick Foley de Grandeur, Mrs. Virgil Floodgates continues with Woody Allen's Word Babcock, April Fleshpot, Max Endorphine, E. Coli Biggs, or Flanders Mealworm. While these extremely suggestive names add to the comic effect of their texts through their own semantic underlayer, they also foreshadow the defining traits of those characters.

More than Robert Benchley, S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen manifest a penchant for erudite references. While S. J. Perelman's texts often bring together references to high art and popular culture, Woody Allen's short fiction and essays brim over with

¹⁷⁴ Perelman quoted in Douglas Fowler. "Perelman and the Tradition On Falling Out of Fashion." *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1992. 233-262, 233.

¹⁷⁵ Pinsker, "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones", 167.

erudition. As Marc S. Reisch noted, “Thurber, S.J. Perelman, and Benchley assume a middle brow attitude, Allen assumes a high brow attitude”¹⁷⁶. As discussed in the previous sub-chapter, Woody Allen takes erudite pretenses to another level and uses this appetite for sophisticated cultural references as devices for parody meant to expose the intellectual fetishism of the social class he belongs to and addresses.

Woody Allen shares Perelman’s preference for farcical parody and uses a series of humorous techniques that had been developed and perfected by S. J. Perelman. The cadence of the discourse, the pretentious rhetoric, the “often outrageously ornate and convoluted” style¹⁷⁷, and the exotic vocabulary are the most prominent characteristic of S. J. Perelman’s writing. As Rolande Diot noted,

The best and the richest of Perelman’s texts are, beyond doubt, those in which his imagination worked freely on language, those in which the multiple images created by these games intertwine, destroy and recompose each other, at the whim of an anarchy of the aleatory, just as in the inextricable drawings resulting from the surrealist frottage. These images come together to form a privileged Image, which is the diegetic image of the Perelmanian world: the unique signified resulting from this gigantic mix of signifiers and their assembly in the form of text.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Reisch, “Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist,” 72.

¹⁷⁷ Douglas, “Perelman”, 166.

¹⁷⁸ Diot, *Humour et surréalisme*, 469. My translation. In the original: « Les meilleurs textes de Perelman et les plus riches sont, sans conteste, ceux où son imagination s’est exercée en liberté sur le langage; ceux où les multiples images nées de ces jeux s’entremêlent, se détruisent et se recomposent, au gré d’une anarchie de l’aléatoire comme dans les inextricables figures issues du frottage surréaliste. Ces images s’assemblent pour former l’Image privilégiée qui est l’image diégétique du monde perelmanien: signifie

S. J. Perelman indulges in experimenting with different registries of language and explores the possibilities of several different semantic fields. Often, slang dances its way through a superficial barricade of elevated, refined words. For example, in "Flatten Your Wallet – High Style Ahead," S. J. Perelman writes:

The response they evoked was hardly what I anticipated. Without exception, the recipients bristled, whether as a reflex action to the throat hairs or because they assumed I was trying to overawe them with my munificence. The gesture cost me a cool ten thou, but I didn't begrudge it.¹⁷⁹

Perelman's easiness in manipulating language has become his signature, but his ornate style goes beyond the mere function of stylistic marker and transforms into a subversive device meant to subtly expose and ridicule language clichés and preciosity. As Joseph Epstein noted,

To read Perelman one has to have read a good deal else besides, for Perelman's style usually involves parody and pastiche, an attack on cliché, a raid on empty phrases, an exploding of unreality, leaving one who brings no bookish knowledge to his work in the literary equivalent of darkest nonsequitural Africa¹⁸⁰.

Bookish knowledge and a penchant for intellectual sophistication are both presupposed and imposed by Woody Allen's short fiction as well. As Douglas Fowler noted, "[j]ust as with Perelman, Woody Allen's burlesque derives in part from the application of an elevated vocabulary and aesthetics to subjects unworthy of

unique et résultante de ce gigantesque mixage de signifiants et leur montage sous forme de texte. »

¹⁷⁹ S. J. Perelman, "Flatten Your Wallet – High Style Ahead." *The New Yorker*. 20 February 1964: 34-35, 34.

¹⁸⁰ Epstein J., "Sid, You Made the Prose Too Thin", 58.

them, one symptom of ‘intellectual’ comedy”¹⁸¹. Woody Allen borrows Perelman’s seducing style and explores the benefits of convoluted phrases in juxtaposing erudition and triviality. In “A Little Louder, Please,” he writes:

Understand you are dealing with a man who knocked off *Finnegans Wake* on the roller coaster at Coney Island, penetrating the abstruse Joycean arcana with ease, despite enough violent lurching to shake loose my silver fillings. ... Also, laddies, as one whose spate of insights first placed *Godot* in proper perspective for the many confused playgoers who milled sluggishly in the lobby during intermission, miffed at ponying up scalper’s money for argle-bargle bereft of one up-tune or a single spangled bimbo, I would have to say my rapport with the seven livelies is pretty solid.¹⁸²

Allen’s use of this strategy of linguistic excess, typical of Perelman, is seen by Adler and Feinman as the weakness of his style since “you have the sense not so much of reading a joke at Perelman’s expense as of reading a forgery”¹⁸³. Nevertheless, given Woody Allen’s genuine admiration for the style of S. J. Perelman and his declared awareness of Perelman’s influence in his work, Allen’s use of Perelmanesque stylistic devices should not be read in terms of parody, but rather as a tribute and a commitment to a particular writing tradition. Moreover, this tradition has a much longer history; as Karen Blansfield explains, the entire American humorous tradition relies on “formal devices” such as “funny names, comic exaggeration, allusions, excessive ornamentation,

¹⁸¹ Fowler, “Perelman”, 257.

¹⁸² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 247.

¹⁸³ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 161. It is also important to remember that Adler and Feinman’s assessment of Woody Allen’s writing came out less than a decade after Allen’s debut in the pages of *The New Yorker*, and before Allen’s short story “The Kugelmass Episode” received the O. Henry Award.

and verbal incongruity – the juxtaposition of lofty and mundane ideas or language.”¹⁸⁴

Undoubtedly, Woody Allen adopts, explores, and reprocesses the style and aesthetics initiated by writers and comedians like Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman. As Adler and Feinman noted, “[l]ike Woody Allen, Benchley and Perelman are basically New Yorkers, feeding on the cadence of New York speech, and the propensity of the New York mind to crack wise.”¹⁸⁵ Rolande Diot argues that the imaginary of Benchley and Perelman follows in the line of the surrealists. Woody Allen’s writing also testifies to the author’s penchant for the ‘derealization’ of the real, for the alteration of the perception of the outer world. All three writers play with cultural, narrative, linguistic, and rhetorical codes and indulge in an ambiguous relationship with reality, emphasized by the voluntary dislocation of the real through the superimposition of multiple contexts, non sequiturs, nonsense, and other strategies of linguistic excess.

Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill contend that both Benchley and Perelman “parody sentimentalism in literature. Both point out the frailty of contemporary human beings confronting the technological world. Both see something ridiculous in man’s fate”¹⁸⁶. Woody Allen’s short fiction closely follows the same tradition because, beyond the stylistic level and the urban sophistication they all promote, there is another, probably stronger binder of their work, which consists of a similarly disenchanted perception of the reality and of the individual’s challenges in coping with the world. This is best seen in the tradition and the

¹⁸⁴ Blansfield, “Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America”, 142.

¹⁸⁵ Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 168.

¹⁸⁶ Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill. “Benchley and Perelman.” *S. J. Perelman: Critical Essays*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1992. 227-232, 232.

evolution of Benchley's Little Man, remodeled and cultivated by both S. J. Perelman and Woody Allen. The Little Man is actually present in the work of most comic writers and cartoonists of *The New Yorker* and, as Blair and Hill noted, by some means or other, they all "made fun of the little man collapsing before the outside world and taking refuge in fantasy and daydreams"¹⁸⁷. They have all exploited the intrinsically laughable traits of man and often extended the target of their ridicule to contain an entire social class. Their focus on situations and narratives involving the neurotic man incapacitated by modern life, on his reactions to failure and humiliation, on the hyperbolic proportions of frustration and the awareness of defeat confined the humor of *The New Yorker* to a specific category referred to by Robert Benchley as "dementia praecox humor"¹⁸⁸, a type of psychotic humor underlining the psychopathological character of the society which produced it. Although the humorists of *The New Yorker* did not invent the Little Man as a type¹⁸⁹, they cultivated, 'educated' this character and "furnished reinforcement [...] in creating a 'genial middle ground' between the consumers of crackerbox humor and readers who preferred the decorum of university wits"¹⁹⁰.

More than Benchley and Perelman, Woody Allen extends the limits of his comic investigation to encompass the universal. He adds an underlying dourness to his comedy as he concentrates on the exploration of the great philosophical and theological

¹⁸⁷ Blair and Hill, *America's Humor*, 421.

¹⁸⁸ Benchley quoted in Lee, 6. Benchley's label goes well together with Harold Ross' desperate remark when he referred to his colleagues from the magazine: "[w]hat I am running here is a goddam bughouse. Not a man in the place without a screw loose". Quoted in Blair and Hill, *America's Humor*, 417.

¹⁸⁹ Norris W. Yates argues that the character type evolved in the nineteenth century and gained more popularity during the first three decades of the twentieth century. See Yates, *The American Humorists*, 226-227.

¹⁹⁰ Yates, *The American Humorists*, 226.

questions that have haunted the human mind for millennia. His apparently breezy writing style often reveals the most tormenting aspects of human existence, as the acute awareness of mortality and the meaninglessness of life in a potentially godless universe overshadow his entire work. As Blansfield points out, "Allen's humor tends to be more subjective and self-conscious."¹⁹¹ Woody Allen admires the talent of his predecessors and overtly acknowledges the influences they had upon his work and his evolution as a comic artist and writer. Allen confessed: "[w]hen I first started to write parodies, I wrote like Shulman. As close as I possibly could get. Then, after I discovered Benchley and Perelman, I wrote like them. It's the best way to learn. From the masters"¹⁹². Nevertheless, Woody Allen processes and transforms all these influences towards consolidating the specific discourse and the authentic humorous signature which distinguish him from other writers.

1.3. Final remarks

The New Yorker is undoubtedly one of the most highly esteemed magazines of its sort, a cultural icon that exerted an impressive influence on the aesthetic taste of the twentieth-century American reader. Intended first for prosperous and well-situated urban sophisticates, the magazine has, in time, become a campus magazine that started to address an educated readership. The considerable artistic and literary merit of the works published in the pages of the magazine created an aura of elitism and sophistication which made both aspiring and established writers gravitate around the cultural pole of *The New Yorker*. Over the

¹⁹¹ Blansfield, "Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America", 143.

¹⁹² Allen quoted in Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 153.

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years, the magazine has published short stories and casuals written by some of the most famous and most anthologized authors of twentieth-century American letters, as well as translations of some of the best pieces of short fiction in twentieth-century world literature.

Woody Allen is part of that generation of writers who have grown up with a deep admiration for *The New Yorker* and for whom being published in the pages of the magazine represented one of the most notable literary achievements. Due to his strong sense of admiration, Woody Allen could immediately assimilate the spirit promoted by *The New Yorker* and easily adapted his style to the aesthetic creed of the magazine. The effortless alignment of Allen's writing style to what Ben Yagoda calls the "*New Yorker* school of fiction"¹⁹³ is closely related to the esteem and appreciation Woody Allen has always felt for his predecessors, especially for Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman.

In his short fiction, Woody Allen follows the ideology, perspectives, and strategies promoted by the tradition of *The New Yorker* short stories. Just like his predecessors from the pages of the magazine, he has assumed and developed a fictional self in the tradition of the anti-hero, the "Little Man" or the *schlemiel* of the Jewish tradition, a character destined for failure, unable to cope with the realities of what he perceives as a hostile universe. Woody Allen has promoted and magnified this fictional persona into the image of the quintessential New York Jew.

The New York theme is always present in Woody Allen's short stories and casuals. He subscribes to the idealization of the urban environment and, even when he presents urban experience as diffuse and shallow, his fiction denotes a strong attachment to the city space. Woody Allen's writing resists sentimentalism and

¹⁹³ Yagoda, *About Town*, 389.

emotionality and he uses his sense of humor to mitigate the visceral uncertainty caused by the vision of a desolating existence under the dictatorship of death. His humor is very much in line with *The New Yorker's* pretense of sophistication and intellectualism and his texts are full of erudite references. Woody Allen's short stories and casuals are spiced with highbrow allusions, penetrating witticisms, and clever puns. All in all, Woody Allen's short fiction subscribes to and, at the same time, enriches the tradition of *The New Yorker* short story.

As seen in this chapter, Woody Allen's writing skills have been shaped under the influence of the guidelines laid down by the fiction editors of *The New Yorker*. The main features of *The New Yorker's* short fiction tradition mark his entire literary universe, not only the pieces he published in the magazine. Not only has Allen adapted his writing style to the literary tradition of the magazine, but it appears that the aesthetics of *The New Yorker* suits his writing talent best. Woody Allen's contribution to the magazine was – and still is – remarkable. He brought to its pages “a gagman's discipline and sense of form, an inspired silliness, and a wonderful ear for a variety of dictions” and demonstrated his ability to master “academic prose, Jewish-American argot, philosophical tracts, private-eye novels, and obscure genres such as the Talmudic tale, with its accompanying commentary”¹⁹⁴. The affinity between Woody Allen's literary talent and the spirit of the magazine has proven beneficial for both parties and constituted the basis for their long-term collaboration.

¹⁹⁴ Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

2.

Literary postmodernism and Woody Allen's short fiction

Woody Allen started to write short stories in a period animated by the “experimental excitements of the 1960s and early 1970s” and preoccupied with “the future of humanism and the collapse of the subject, with the power of reportage and the fictive text, with the recovery of realism and the advance of avant gardism”¹, a period which dominated the American literary stage from the mid-60s onwards. American fiction of the second half of the twentieth century is characterized by Malcolm Bradbury as “a fiction of playful seductions quoting the past and constructing the indeterminacies of the present with a new buoyancy.”² This seductive playfulness which opens a wide range of fictional experiments becomes the major coordinate of what came to be termed literary postmodernism.

Postmodernism is an extensively debated and substantially controversial notion, which engendered a wide spectrum of diverse, often contradictory, theoretical standpoints. The term is employed to define “the stylistic character and condition, the

¹ Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro, *Contemporary American Fiction*. London: Edward Arnold, 1987, ix.

² Bradbury, *Contemporary American Fiction*, viii.

dominant aesthetic and epistemological tendency"³ of the cultural environment of the second half of the twentieth century. The French theorist Jean François Lyotard, one of the most influential theorists of postmodernism to underline its positive, almost liberating potential, defines the postmodern as "incredulity towards metanarratives"⁴ bent on contesting the validity of major ideologies and discourses, of 'the grand narratives' (Enlightenment, Hegelian, Marxist) used to legitimate human knowledge and points out that postmodern knowledge "refines our sensitivity to difference and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."⁵ Lyotard's emphasis on the subjective nature of all systems became paradigmatic for the entire postmodern movement. It manifests in literature through the writers' refusal of conventionally realistic approaches to their work, residing in the impossibility of depending on epistemological certainties.

Jean Baudrillard, another key contributor to defining the postmodern attitude, seems more concerned with the disquieting relationship between reality and representation and with the emergence of the hyperreal. He claims that the postmodern age operates under the logic of the simulacra, "a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal"⁶ which "threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary.'"⁷

³ Bradbury, *Contemporary American Fiction*, xv.

⁴ Jean François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. 1979. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, xxiv.

⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxv.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulations*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. 1981. Michigan: Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, 7.

⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 3.

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In Baudrillard's opinion, the difference between objects and signs has been erased, and commodity functions as a social code, a mediator of social values, and a marker of identity.

Following a similar line of thought, American literary critic and theorist Fredric Jameson investigates postmodern culture as the result of a series of transformations that occurred in global economics, technology, and communication and allowed the expansion of media culture. Jameson describes postmodernism as the cultural expression of a "new moment of late consumer or multinational capitalism."⁸ The reign of commodity corrupted the traditional perception of cultural contexts and distorted the individual's sense of reality. Caught in a schizophrenic deathlessness, the aesthetic of postmodernism is, in Jameson's opinion, characterized by "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past,"⁹ by an "absolute and absolutely random pluralism,"¹⁰ by "a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems."¹¹ Adopting an antipodal position, Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner claim that the "postmodern emphasis on disintegration and change" is an opportunity for "new openings and possibilities for social transformation and struggle", for "a more diverse, open and contextual politics that refuses to privilege any general recipes for social change or any particular group."¹²

⁸ Fredric Jameson. *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern*. 1998. London & New York: Verso, 2009, 20.

⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

¹⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 372.

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 372.

¹² Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory. Critical Interrogations*. London: Macmillan, 1991, 286.

The debate on postmodernism is ample since the term itself suffers, in Ihab Hassan's words, from "*semantic instability*,"¹³ but, as he put it, "what better name to give this curious age?"¹⁴ Ihab Hassan, one of the first theorists of postmodernism, describes the "postmodern universe"¹⁵ as a dichotomic construct characterized by a series of complementarities and antinomies, including "sameness and difference, unity and rupture,"¹⁶ "continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony"¹⁷ and, what he considers as the "central constitutive tendencies in postmodernism," "immanence and indeterminacy."¹⁸ In his endeavor, he continuously refers to the relationship between modernism and postmodernism and operates a binary taxonomy based on what he had identified as the main coordinates of each period.

A considerable number of theorists have adopted a similar approach, embracing a comparative perspective in order to provide a better understanding of postmodernism and its relation to modernism, precisely because the term *postmodernism* itself implies semantic kinship to the previous movement. The debate over this aspect appears to be even more fervent than the one regarding the label associated with this "curious age." Fredric Jameson, for example, emphasizes the normality of the "radical breaks between periods" which "do not generally involve complete changes of content" but rather "the restructuring of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an

¹³ Ihab Hassan. *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987, 86.

¹⁴ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 87.

¹⁵ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 86.

¹⁶ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 88.

¹⁷ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 89.

¹⁸ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 92.

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earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary"¹⁹. Jameson describes the relationship between the two as a "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology" which "can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject."²⁰ The same basic scheme involving a fundamental transmutation is also explored by Brian McHale who elaborates on the change in the process of cognition which he sees as "the shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*—from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*."²¹ Other authors view postmodernism as a reaction against modernism, and describe it as the repudiation of utopian modernist expectations, a challenge to "the rigidity of form, systems, and codes imposed by modernism," to the "existing modes of thought, economic ideology and political assertions."²² Many authors insist on a chronologically determined relationship, but Lyotard reverts chronology by claiming that postmodernism is not "modernism at its end but in the nascent state."²³ Linda Hutcheon insists on the paradoxical intricacies of the relation between modernism and postmodernism. In Hutcheon's words, "postmodernism's relation to modernism ... marks neither a simple and radical break from it, nor a straightforward continuity

¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 177.

²⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 14.

²¹ Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*. 1987. London & New York: Routledge, 2004, 10.

²² Farhat Iftekharrudin. "Introduction.", Eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin. et al., *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003, 1-23, 1.

²³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

with it: it is both and neither."²⁴ Brian McHale contributes to the discussion by providing an explanation for the effervescence of the debates surrounding postmodernism:

There is no postmodernism "out there" in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or a romanticism "out there." These are all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians. And since they are discursive constructs rather than real-world objects, it is possible to construct them in a variety of ways.²⁵

Cultural and literary movements often resist being confined to an all-encompassing theoretical framework, but in the case of postmodernism, its very nature stands against such an attempt. As Simon Malpas noted, "this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge."²⁶ Postmodernism stirred both complementary and contradictory ideological, aesthetic, or stylistic reactions, and this complex *mélange* of standpoints magnified into a metaphor for the entire movement. Although bearing considerable unresolved contradictions, postmodernist (literary) theory provides adequate tools to explore Woody Allen's short stories. After all, his writing developed simultaneously with the postmodernist ethos; it witnessed the birth, the blooming, and the fading away of postmodernism, and his short stories rely on fictional strategies generally attributed to postmodernist fiction.

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. 1988. New York & London: Routledge, 2003, 18.

²⁵ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 4.

²⁶ Simon Malpas. *The Postmodern*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005, 4.

2.1. Postmodernist (short) fiction

In literary studies, *postmodernism* is a term that has been used to encompass "a good many experimental writers whose work is therefore assumed to share much in common," and whose writing contested, deconstructed and redefined "the practice of fiction and the nature of the fictional tradition."²⁷ As John Barth points out (implicitly complaining about the formal and aesthetic restraints imposed on literary works by such conventional labels), "some of us who have been publishing fiction since the 1950s have had the interesting experience of being praised or damned in that decade as existentialists and in the early 1960s as black humorists [...] Now we are praised and damned as postmodernists."²⁸ The literary events of the Sixties announced a paradigmatic change in the way in which fiction was to be approached. The non-traditional and playful engagement with writing and the increased preoccupation with metafictional strategies were not welcome with open arms, and critics would frequently be reticent to such literary innovations. Often writers who came of age during that period have been ignored or criticized for their literary eccentricity. Nevertheless, the end of the decade and the beginning of the Seventies announced that this 'new' fiction was not an ephemeral caprice; it started a trend that would dominate the decades to follow.

Postmodernist fiction can be viewed as a response to the socio-historical changes of the second half of the twentieth century, when the harshness of post-war American realities, starting with

²⁷ Bradbury, *Contemporary American Fiction*, xv.

²⁸ John Barth. "The Literature of Replenishment." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984. 193-206, 196.

the traumatic legacy of World War II and continuing with the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War or the Watergate Affair, challenged all existing landmarks. The legacy of World War II caused a paradigm shift in the way writers understood to represent the realities they were experiencing.²⁹ As announced by William Faulkner in the acceptance speech he gave at the Nobel Prize Banquet, on December 10, 1950, in Stockholm,

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.³⁰

If Faulkner appears nostalgic and reticent to welcome this new wave, which he felt had already begun to shake the modernist literary ground, two decades later, Ronald Sukenick ascertains and accepts the paradigmatic shift in culture, the change in mood and dominant notes in the field of literary expression, as the natural reaction to a godless post-war reality, unable to sustain monolithic truths and ultimate purposes. In Ronald Sukenick's words,

Fiction constitutes a way of looking at the world. Therefore, I will begin by considering how the world looks in what I think we may now begin to call the contemporary post-realistic novel. Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted

²⁹ Robert Eaglestone builds a convincing case that "the constellation of ideas, approaches, and aesthetic practices broadly described as 'postmodern' have their origins in a response to the Holocaust". See Robert Eaglestone. "After the Holocaust." *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*. Ed. Brian McHale and Len Platt. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. 39-51.

³⁰ William Faulkner. "Banquet Speech." 20 December 1950. *The Official Web Site of the Nobel Prize*. Accessed on 20 January 2012.

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narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, and, above all, the ultimate concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. ... The contemporary writer – the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part – is forced to start from scratch: reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version.³¹

Reacting to the times, postmodernist fiction had come to prefer fragmentation to unity and derivation to originality as means of coping with the dispersal of the securities of tradition and the corrosion of epistemological certainties. It challenges interpretation by suspending control, order, form, and significance, and it assumes the flatness and the surface orientation of the general culture. As Gerhard Hoffmann points out, it rejects "the essentialism of self and form, as well as the 'strong' meta-concepts of rational order, continuity, causality, teleology, and wholeness, and the general depth orientation of romantic and modern art" and it keeps "to the surface of character and plot and the situational context."³² Postmodernist fiction rebels against "the rigid art ideology of modernism" by creating "a new mode of experience, a new consciousness, a new intellectual style and [...] new playful possibilities for the imagination" which escaped the "frustrations of existential alienation and over-serious devotion to awareness, which did not allow fiction a significant variation of perspectives since modernism reached its peak."³³

³¹ Ronald Sukenick. "The Death of the Novel." *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*. New York: The Dial Press, 1969. 41-102, 41.

³² Gerhard Hoffmann. *From Modernism to Postmodernism. Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2005, 43-44.

³³ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 14.

According to Peter Currie,³⁴ there is a commensalist relationship between postmodernism and modernism, as postmodernist fiction relates to the aesthetic of modernism and incorporates modernist gestures and strategies in a paradoxical, inverse manner. However, modernist and postmodernist fiction share common features, the most important of which is the repudiation of *mimesis*, the aesthetic of nineteenth-century realism. Mimetic representation no longer appeals to either modernist or postmodernist writers. The innovations of the modernists are clearly directed toward challenging the true-to-nature representation which dominated the artistic creation of the previous period. For James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, and other modernist writers, subjectivity and the exploration of inner realities gained supremacy over the Aristotelic mimetic techniques. Postmodernism also manifests skepticism towards the realist tradition, or, as Bran Nicol paraphrases Lyotard's famous phrase, "incredulity towards realism."³⁵ This distrust of realist referential techniques is visible in the work of a series of writers who recognize "either implicitly or explicitly, that it is no longer possible to indulge in the kind of pretense about the possibility of 'transcription' which is central to realism."³⁶

The postmodernist attitude towards true-to-life representation emphasizes the imperative of re-conceptualizing realism and reconfiguring art's capacity to replicate real life. The relationship between literature and reality remains representational, but not

³⁴ Peter Currie. "The Eccentric Self: Anti-Characterization and the Problem of the Subject in American Postmodernist Fiction." *Contemporary American Fiction*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro. London: Edward Arnold, 1987. 53-70.

³⁵ Bran Nicol. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 19.

³⁶ Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, 23.

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analogous. The means and the dynamics of this relationship underwent considerable transformation in order to adapt to the imperatives of the day. Postmodernist fiction challenges mimesis and comes up with unexpected and creative alternatives to the realist mode of representing the world and, "instead of drawing the reader's attention to conditions that prevail 'outside', in the mundane universe ... it drew it 'inward', towards the literary object itself, questioning the very principles by which fiction has been produced since the invention of the text."³⁷ Thus, postmodernist fiction accesses a meta-level, which allows it to expose literary conventions and alter the fundamental coordinates of representation. Linearity is replaced by fragmentation, chronology is distorted, and conventional logic is challenged. As Gerhard Hoffmann explains,

... texts whose formal strategy replaces totality with multiplicity, register the loss of centers (God, reason, identity, history, America, Art), and foreground discontinuity, incoherence, non-structurability, and, instead of uni-linear logic, of progress and synthesis, emphasize rather the 'process of making and remaking' (Foucault) and the practice of reflecting upon the artistic process.³⁸

Postmodernist fiction displays a marked tendency to expose literary formulae and clichés. It is a "self-reflexive art form, with a keen suspicion of the referential function of language,"³⁹ keen on exploring and pushing the limits of imagination to the extreme. According to John Barth, literary theorists tend to see it as a type of "fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes,

³⁷ Noel Harold Kaylor. "Postmodernism in the American Short Story: Some General Observations and Some Specific Cases." *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. Eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin et al. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003. 240-253, 247.

³⁸ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 27.

³⁹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 25.

[and] less and less about objective reality and life in the world."⁴⁰ Postmodernist writers have been seduced by metafictional exercises, by self-aware writing, and they have transformed their experiments with form, style, and genres into themes and subjects. One of the first and most relevant exercises in exposing fictional conventions is precisely John Barth's "Lost in the Fun House," a text that discloses and emphasizes its own inability to follow traditional literary conventions. Metafiction, probably the most distinctive fictional strategy of postmodernism, allows writers to explore and take advantage of the formal possibilities of fiction. It is also the sincerest mode of writing as the authors seem to be most concerned with exposing the process of writing.

Postmodernist fictional experiments extend toward other fictional realms, causing transtextual disturbances. According to Linda Hutcheon, "[w]hat we tend to call postmodernism in literature today is usually characterized by intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality."⁴¹ Writers do not limit their endeavors to recuperating and parodying older styles and genres, but actually invade other texts in order to expose them, salvage characters, or simply engage in an exercise of what Genette calls 'hypertextuality.'⁴² Postmodernism thus turns into a Babylonian, heteroglotic movement, using tradition in a gratuitous (Jameson) or critical (Hutcheon) manner and playing with the inconsistencies of a cultural given, freed from a controlling power and released from the gravitational movement around a center.

⁴⁰ Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment", 200.

⁴¹ Linda Hutcheon. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." 1989. University of Toronto Libraries. Eds. P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Online. Accessed on 19 June 2012, 3.

⁴² Gérard Genette. *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

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Postmodernism instates a type of "aggressive, cynical, even nihilistic humor" that announces the emergence of a "new mode" and a "new mood" in literature⁴³ and is generally interpreted as a reaction to the deep exploration of subjectivity typical of modernism. Tony Hilfer associates "the first wave of postmodernist fiction, running from 1955 to 1965", with the aesthetic of black humor and cynicism and views the work of the writers of this period in the light of the large-scale rationalization of the entire society.⁴⁴ He sees black humor as "a reduction of action to mechanical process and of self to role [...] a detached, cold-blooded tone especially in relation to concerns conventionally treated with seriousness and pathos."⁴⁵ This replacement of monumental feelings and emotions, of the sensible, pathetic mode with the new comic mode as a postmodern coping mechanism is what Fredric Jameson calls "the waning of affect in postmodern culture."⁴⁶ The heroic, monolithic selfhood is deconstructed and reconfigured as fragments, "a collage of picked up pieces, derived from the culture, mass as well as elite."⁴⁷ In his attempt at clarifying and classifying the dominant trends in post-war experimental American literature, Tony Hilfer argues that the black humor phase is followed by the reign of metafiction. However, there is no clear distinction between the two, and black humor continues to appeal to postmodernist writers, along with the affinity for play and the propensity for self-reflective writing.

⁴³ Tony Hilfer, *American Fiction since 1940*. London & New York: Longman, 1992, 98.

⁴⁴ Hilfer, *American Fiction since 1940*, 103.

⁴⁵ Hilfer, *American Fiction since 1940*, 103.

⁴⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 10.

⁴⁷ Hilfer, *American Fiction since 1940*, 99.

The devices used by postmodernist writers to either convey, or dissipate and distort meaning range from irony and play to satire, farce, and parody or pastiche (the 'blank parody' discussed by Fredric Jameson⁴⁸). Postmodernist fiction tackles the absurd, the surreal, the monstrous, and the grotesque. It continuously shifts perspectives from anxiety, panic, and paranoia to irony, to the burlesque and the comical. In Gerhard Hoffman's words,

Satire aims at criticism of social deformation from a safe value point. The *grotesque* grows out of satire when all values are denied; it denotes the inexplicable deformation of humans by humans. *Farce* may render the grotesque lightly. The *monstrous* is a postmodern outgrowth of the grotesque, the ineffable extremity of evil. *Play* is here 'free' play (Derrida) of the mind upon things, conventions and structures. *Irony* is an attitude of negativity and includes irony as attitude, method and form. *Parody* ironizes and transforms texts, traditions, and styles, and may gain new work out of an old one. The postmodern *comic* mode is a 'free' kind of comic perspective that reduces the comic conflict to a collision of concepts, a flipping-over of positions, the ridiculous simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.⁴⁹

All these variations and interweaving perspectives testify to the postmodern pluralistic aesthetic view which can easily slide towards the 'anything goes' attitude of a "schizophrenic writing" characterized, according to Fredric Jameson, by "a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory."⁵⁰

Although studies on postmodernist fiction tend to focus on the evolution of the novel, the short story proved extremely receptive to the shift in cultural dominant and was fast to absorb the vibes of the new literary wave. As Farhat Iftekharrudin points

⁴⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

⁴⁹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 26.

⁵⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 22.

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out, the Sixties represent "the greatest period of social and scientific upheaval in American history" which caused "a new modal change in the short story."⁵¹ The development of fiction mimics the nature of American life, "its rapid and ever-accelerating consumption of styles, its cultural eclecticism and its culturelessness."⁵² The "long Sixties" are acknowledged as a transition period in American literature, a period of aesthetic readjustment dominated by "the radical aesthetic of disruptivist fiction,"⁵³ during which authors were still attempting to "negotiate between traditional and Beat influences."⁵⁴ This was a period in which major figures like Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Cheever, Flannery O'Connor, Bernard Malamud, and Vladimir Nabokov reached literary maturity, when authors like Jorge Luis Borges were translated into English and published in the United States, and writers such as John Barth, Saul Bellow, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, William H. Gass, Joyce Carol Oates, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth were gaining ground by consolidating their literary styles. Some of them decided to write in a rather traditional and conventional manner, focusing either on ethnic and group-specific issues or concentrating their efforts on society in general, while others were determined to explore the limits of literary experiments, embracing metafiction, fragmentation, and other postmodernist literary techniques.

⁵¹ Farhat Iftekharrudin, et al., eds. *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003, x.

⁵² Bradbury, *Contemporary American Fiction*, viii.

⁵³ Jerome Klinkowitz. *Literary Disruptions. The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*. 2nd Edition. Urbana, Chicago & London: University of Illinois Press, 1980, 185.

⁵⁴ Boddy, *The American Short Story*, 56.

This period is crucial for the evolution of the short story due to its attempts at reconfiguring its own parameters and negotiating its relationship with other genres. As Andrea O'Reilly Herrera explains, during this period, "theorists of the short story are ... *at the crossroads* once again, for scores of contemporary authors are penning nomadic texts that resist categorization and definition in that they freely cross generic borders and openly defy the formal characteristics employed to distinguish among literary forms."⁵⁵ This points out what a vital, dynamic, and flexible genre the short story is, and how easily it synchronizes with the pulse of the society in which it experienced its most impressive evolution.⁵⁶ If up to this moment the short story managed to keep the reputation of a conventional, 'well-behaved' genre, by the end of the decade it got "at the fore of the avant-garde."⁵⁷ Due to its intrinsic characteristics, its brevity, and its capacity to epitomize moments and significations in a small dose of prose, the short story becomes one of the favorite genres for the postmodernist experimental playfulness, and probably the most adequate means of writerly expression in "an age in which the new tends to be obsolete by tomorrow, in which change seems more relevant than order, and eventual destruction the only reality."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. "Sandra Benitez and the Nomadic Text." *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*. Ed. Farhat Iftekharrudin et al. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003. 50-62, 51.

⁵⁶ According to A. Walton Litz, the short story "presents the most coherent record of America's literary and social development." Quoted in Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 27.

⁵⁷ Jerome Klinkowitz and John L. Somer. *Innovative Fiction: Stories for the Seventies*. New York: Dell, 1977, xvi.

⁵⁸ Peden, *The American Short Story*, 6.

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Echoing both the Lyotardian deconstruction of grand narratives and the New Historicist preference for the anecdote over national literary histories, Richard E. Lee claims that

... our version of Western culture is skeptical about everything save skepticism itself [...] This is one reason to value short fiction as the genre that speaks most directly to the parochial and local rather than the totalizing narratives of the novel. Short fiction is always and already 'new historical' in its celebration of the *ort*.⁵⁹

This strong distrust of grand narratives manifested through fragmentizing tendencies implies a particular compatibility between the short genre and the mores of the age.

The postmodernist short story divorced its traditional slice-of-life narrative role in an attempt to escape prior fictional strategies and formulae, to dissolve old patterns through the power of imagination and playful association. There were, of course, writers who remained on a more conventional ground, but most of them would use every opportunity to challenge, contest, and (re)define the genre using artifices and experiments that addressed both genre-specific conventions and narrative devices. During the High Sixties,⁶⁰ experiments bloomed and "variety was the order of the day."⁶¹ Short story writers manifested an urge to break out from traditional literary conventions and models. As Kasia Boddy put it,

⁵⁹ Richard E. Lee "Crippled by the Truth: Oracular Pronouncements, Titillating Titles, and the Postmodern Ethic." *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. Ed. Farhat Iftekharrudin et al. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003. 109-122, 109.

⁶⁰ The term used to refer to the period roughly from 1967-1968 to 1971-1972, when American life was confronted with a series of social, political, and cultural movements.

⁶¹ Boddy, *The American Short Story*, 59.

All sorts of alternatives were proposed. Some writers revived pre-modern forms such as the fable or fairy tale or drew upon short fiction's links to the discursive essay and Kafkaesque philosophical parable. Others looked further afield. Why not write a story in the form of a questionnaire or footnotes or as a TV game show? Why not make collages combining words and images? Why not write fiction for 'tape' or 'live voice' as well as for print? In other words, anything went – except, that is, the mood-driven, slice-of-life realist short story.⁶²

The short story has been extremely receptive to the new modes of fictional representation and interrogation of limits promoted by postmodernism and this general trend came to influence Woody Allen's short fiction to a considerable extent. As shall be further discussed, his short stories reflect the ethos of postmodernism and are built around postmodernist literary strategies.

2.2. Postmodernism according to Allen

Woody Allen made his debut as a short fiction writer in the context of the densely experimental American fiction of the Sixties, a period that often associated with the rise of postmodernism. As Brian McHale explains,

The consensus view seems to be that postmodernism emerged over the course of the "long sixties," the span of years from the mid-fifties to the early seventies. This is a reasonable and defensible position, for even if elements of what would later be called postmodernism can be traced back to the early fifties, or even as far back the late thirties or earlier – maybe much earlier – these elements converge only in the sixties to form something like a period style.⁶³

⁶² Boddy, *The American Short Story*, 60.

⁶³ McHale, "Introduction: On or about the Year 1966", 91.

Woody Allen's short prose presents all the symptoms associated with postmodernist fiction described by Hoffmann as "the postmodern eclecticism in theme [...] the dissemination of meaning, the play with theme and character, form and composition, and the perspectives of radical irony and the comic mode."⁶⁴ Moreover, Allen has appropriated the strategies of postmodernist fiction and started to exploit, expose, and exaggerate them as if in an attempt at parody in the second degree.

Woody Allen's short fiction is equipped with what Allan Lloyd Smith describes as "the arsenal of what are generally called postmodernist literary techniques"⁶⁵ and uses it by the book, with impressive technical awareness, as if to simultaneously illustrate and expose its mechanisms. Allen's texts engage with intertextuality, interpolated and misplaced worlds, 'transworld identities' (Eco), or 'metalepsis' (Genette). His heterotopian construction of space defines itself through distorted spatial coordinates, his world is inhabited by distorted characters, hypertrophied figures built through comparisons and corrupted metaphors devoid of their abstract referential power and ultimately reduced to literality. The characters in Woody Allen's short stories are in no way surprised if accused of killing God, if they levitate and forget how to get their feet back on the ground, or if Mickey Mouse testifies in a court of law. In his fiction, entities transgress the boundaries of their original world and easily adjust to other fictional environments. Real-world identities are transferred into the fictional world, with or without their external

⁶⁴ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 59.

⁶⁵ Allan Lloyd Smith. "Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodernist Writing." *Contemporary American Fiction*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro. London: Edward Arnold, 1987. 39-52, 40.

field of reference (e.g. Gertrude Stein, Mahler, and Hemingway as themselves, or Van Gogh as a dentist). Historical fantasy, as a revisionist postmodernist literary strategy, is used by Allen to demystify conventional history. He works with history and specific historical events and resorts to the postmodernist satirical reinterpretation of history in order to mock history's great stereotypes and clichés related to revolution, war, or heroism. Woody Allen's texts shape-shift and imitate different genres, thus interweaving existent literary resources and creative reinterpretations in an intertextual, heteroglotic exploration of the potentialities of fiction. The heteroglossia of his discourse shows in several short stories. "Mr. Big," for example, mixes hardboiled fiction and detective story slang with classical philosophical discourse, resulting in a plurality of discourses, a type of polyphony typical of postmodernist writers.⁶⁶

Viewed as a whole, Woody Allen's short story collections resemble a carnival of postmodernist fictional strategies and genres, gathering and mixing various types of discourses, typical of hardboiled fiction, epistolary writing, philosophy, theory, essays, or literary journals, and turn to parodying the very genre they engage. While he employs postmodernist strategies in reprocessing older literary styles, he becomes more critical and parodical when it comes to postmodernist literary behavior. Postmodernist parody is taken to the extreme as Woody Allen's short fiction parodies postmodernist fiction itself, thus creating a type of parody of the second order. Woody Allen uses his texts to illustrate every postmodernist narrative technique, as if in an attempt to create a guidebook of applied postmodernist literary strategies – but he does so from a critical stance. Allen does not

⁶⁶ See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 166-170.

completely subscribe to the episteme of postmodernism described by Gerhard Hoffmann as "a loss of [...] subjectivity as a measure of reality,"⁶⁷ but uses all of these techniques to configure and develop a strong, centered fictional consciousness, the 'Allen self'.

2.2.1. *New York is expanding*

In *Annie Hall*, young Alvy Singer refuses to do his homework because "the universe is expanding" and, despite his mother's and Dr. Flicker's attempts to convince him of the contrary, he still believes that "if it is expanding, someday it will break apart and that will be the end of everything,"⁶⁸ so there is no point in doing one's homework, nor anything else for that matter. The claim of Alvy's mother that "Brooklyn is not expanding" does not hold, especially in the case of Woody Allen's short fiction, where New York is definitely expanding, distorting, colliding with other universes, and even breaking apart; however, contrary to Alvy's expectations, this is only 'the beginning of everything' in the postmodernist fictional game.

World construction in postmodernist fiction contests one of the core pretenses of realism, "that the fictional world it creates exists in its entirety, is analogous to the real world, and that writing is, consequently, 'referential.'"⁶⁹ Postmodernist fiction also distanced itself from the modernist tendency to integrate the outer world into psychological explorations and to focus on a synthesis of internal and external realities. By pleading allegiance to metafiction as the guiding aesthetic belief, postmodernist writers

⁶⁷ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 105.

⁶⁸ *Annie Hall*. By Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Woody Allen and Diane Keaton. Rollins-Joffe Productions. 1977.

⁶⁹ Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. 24.

construct fictional worlds using techniques that disclose the make-believe literary mechanisms employed during previous literary periods and perfected by realism.

Postmodernism is generally characterized by fragmentation and the loss of the center, which makes room for the creation of what Fredric Jameson describes as an “extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing original new global space which is the ‘moment of truth’ of postmodernism” and which leaves individuals “bereft of spatial coordinates.”⁷⁰ Jameson’s perspective holds true for the narrated space as it reflects upon the loss of spatial centrality in postmodernist fiction as well. In Gerhard Hoffman’s words, the postmodern narrated space “loses its spatial self-containedness and its geographical, relatively homogenous societal basis.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, postmodernist fiction’s engagement with space invites critical commentaries on its cultural context. As Petronia Petrar argues, “the relation between literature and space is meaningful, productive, and one of the best ways to attempt the understanding of contemporary culture, the reason being that this relation is mutual, permanent, and open.”⁷² Therefore, the experimental nature of spatial representations in postmodernist fiction can be construed as a growth in sophistication and level of abstraction meant to enhance the understanding of a complex and complicated reality.

The reinterpretation of space and the de/re-construction of worlds is one of the favorite writerly exercises in postmodernist fiction. Space is no longer defined in its conventional functionality

⁷⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 49.

⁷¹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 359.

⁷² Petronia Petrar, *Spatial Representations in the Contemporary British Fiction*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012, 5.

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and spatial forms are challenged, loosened and dissolved, governed by the rules of the exuberant and playful postmodern imagination. Gerhard Hoffmann views world construction in postmodernist fiction as characterized by the dialectic of continuous connection and separation. In Hoffmann's words,

separation and connection play against one another to create juxtapositions, gaps, blanks, linguistic disorder, verbal patterns, the scattering of words on the page, all those strategies that dissolve dualities of thought and value, and stress the 'wordiness' of literature.⁷³

Hoffmann has identified three major dominants for the use of spatiality in postmodernist fiction, which define it in terms of a shift from its previous representational role and point towards its deconstructive tendency. Hoffmann writes:

First, the appearance-disappearance paradigm reigns in the presentation of space; second, space is liberated from the concept of (determinate) milieu, from the projection of inner into outer, and from elaborate description; and, third, movement is transformed into a mere operation in space and time: beginning, end and goal are lost or suspended.⁷⁴

The problematic interaction of fictional worlds and the question of plausibility in postmodernist fiction is designed "for the purpose of exploring ontological propositions,"⁷⁵ thus subordinating the question of (un)reliability to ontological issues. Brian McHale explores spatial structures and spatial organization in postmodernist fiction and insists on four main strategies

⁷³ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 276.

⁷⁴ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 364.

⁷⁵ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 43.

employed by postmodernist texts to (de)construct fictional worlds. McHale writes:

The space of a fictional world is a construct, just as the characters and objects that occupy it are, or the actions that unfold within it. Typically, in realist and modernist writing, this spatial construct is organized around a perceiving subject, either a character or the viewing position adopted by a disembodied narrator. The heterotopian zone of postmodernist writing cannot be organized in this way, however. Space here is less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time. Postmodernist fiction draws upon a number of strategies for constructing/deconstructing space, among them *juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution*.⁷⁶

The first strategy McHale has identified presupposes the creation of an impossible map out of randomly juxtaposing real-world geographic locations. Interpolation refers to “introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space, or *between* two adjacent areas of space where no such ‘between’ exists,”⁷⁷ while superimposition involves a construct in which “two familiar spaces are placed one on top of the other, as in a photographic double-exposure.”⁷⁸ Misattribution refers to an arbitrary association of places and characteristics or clichés which, in the real world, have nothing in common. All these fictional strategies derive from the logic of the heterotopian space, a space of discontinuity and incompatibility, defined by Michel Foucault as “the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*.”⁷⁹ As Foucault further explains,

⁷⁶ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 45.

⁷⁷ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 46.

⁷⁸ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 46.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*. London & New York: Routledge, 2002, xix.

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Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'.⁸⁰

Foucault's *heterotopia* was borrowed by Brian McHale in his attempt at defining a functional paradigm for the postmodernist rendering of spatiality. Brian McHale develops the Foucauldian heterotopian space into what he calls 'the zone', which is just as "radically discontinuous and inconsistent" and "juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure."⁸¹

Woody Allen is no stranger to the playful manipulation of world-building conventions and, often enough, he completely removes the fictional realm of his short stories from the immediate world of reference. The dialectic of connection and separation is very much at work in Woody Allen's short fiction as he distorts spatial coordinates, materializes spatial metaphors, plays with overlapping worlds, and profits from the strategic benefits of these techniques by allowing derealization and the perverting of experience. Allen's short fiction presents instances of juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution as defined by Brian McHale and, although generally put to humorous use, the postmodern play that underlies his world-building strategies also performs an exploration of these specific literary techniques and, ultimately, a critical revision of reality.

Young Alvy Singer's above-mentioned concerns about the expansion of the universe are confirmed in "The UFO Menace"

⁸⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xix.

⁸¹ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 44.

where the narrator claims that: "[t]he key factor in thinking about the universe, however, is that it is expanding and will one day break apart and disappear."⁸² "The UFO Menace" is intended as a report on extraterrestrial contacts, written in the journalistic vernacular, featuring a historical approach, an analysis of various testimonials on the subject, as well as personal insights. The discourse often slides towards that of stand-up comedy: "Interestingly, according to modern astronomers, space is finite. This is a very comforting thought – particularly for people who can never remember where they have left things."⁸³ This testifies to Woody Allen's predisposition for heteroglotic texts, a mixing of discourses employed by postmodernist writers to enhance the "centrifugal tendencies" of the text and used "as an opening wedge, a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse."⁸⁴ Like many of Woody Allen's short stories, this text also ends in a mock-moralizing, mock-didactic tone, as a Louisiana factory worker who had been abducted by extraterrestrial beings conveys the aliens' message for humans: "They told me they were from another galaxy and were here to tell the earth that we must learn to live in peace or they will return with special weapons and laminate every first-born male."⁸⁵

"The UFO Menace" is built on a series of misattributions the purpose of which is to comically challenge the clichéd hysterical approaches to this topic. The text plays a game of superimposing a surreal, absurd sequence of events over what it attempts to describe as an accurate representation of the real world, in order to

⁸² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 326.

⁸³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 326.

⁸⁴ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 167.

⁸⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 331.

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emphasize the mock-comic effect. For example, Sir Chester Ramsbottom reports that he had been terrorized by an unidentified, cigar-shaped flying object and because of this traumatic event, he ended up in a hospital. However, "[u]pon investigation, experts determined that the 'cigar-shaped object' was Sir Chester's nose. Naturally, all his evasive actions could not lose it, since it was attached to his face."⁸⁶ Grotesque distortions are not uncommon in Woody Allen's short fiction. They often and provocatively engage with the normative discourse of normalcy, exposing its structural instability. Apparently, in postmodernist fiction, grotesquerie "has become accepted as the norm itself, and one reason for this stems from what we might call a new sense of order, a generalized shift in the old established hierarchies, both social and cultural as well as literary, which postmodernism seems to have deliberately sought."⁸⁷

An alien encounter is also misattributed to Goethe who recounts the event as follows:

En route home from the Leipzig Anxiety Festival, [...] I was crossing a meadow, when I chanced to look up and saw several fiery red balls suddenly appear in the southern sky. They descended at a great rate of speed and began chasing me. I screamed that I was a genius and consequently could not run very fast, but my words were wasted. I became enraged and shouted imprecations at them, whereupon they flew away frightened.⁸⁸

Allen uses a technique based on the paradoxical synthesis of the real and the misattributed: Goethe's misattributed statement is followed by a series of true details of his life (his visits to Beethoven

⁸⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 328.

⁸⁷ Brian Crews. "Martin Amis and the Postmodern Grotesque." *The Modern Language Review* 105. 3 (2010): 641–59, 641.

⁸⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 327.

after the latter had already lost his hearing). The true and the logical surrender to the postmodernist playful challenge of reality, which might not have any other finality than to expose the world as a universe of random utterances.

"Reminiscences: Places and People" is the result of an ebullient surrealist imagination which plays on the literalization of metaphors, comic metamorphoses, and cultural clichés. It is a collage of memories recounted by a writer. The reality mediated through the consciousness and memory of the narrator is literally turned upside-down from the very beginning:

Brooklyn: Tree-lined streets. The Bridge. Churches and cemeteries everywhere. And candy stores. A small boy helps a bearded old man across the street and says, "Good Sabbath." The old man smiles and empties his pipe on the boy's head. The child runs crying into his house... Stifling heat and humidity descend on the borough. Residents bring folding chairs out onto the street after dinner to sit and talk. Suddenly it begins to snow. Confusion sets in. A vender wends his way down the street selling hot pretzels. He is set upon by dogs and chased up a tree. Unfortunately for him, there are more dogs at the top of the tree.⁸⁹

The world is distorted and misrepresented like in a carnival mirror as the upside-down-ness affects both the environment and subjective perception, as is the case with the narrator's visit to Paris:

I come upon a man at an outdoor cafe. It is André Malraux. Oddly, he thinks that I am André Malraux. [...] Years later, we meet at a dinner, and again he insists that I am Malraux. This time, I go along with it and get to eat his fruit cocktail.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 389.

⁹⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 391.

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Subject to the postmodernist free play, identity as a unifying notion is put to scrutiny, which brings to mind McHale's claim regarding the ontological concerns of postmodernism.

The narrator insists on invoking a series of realistic topographic details (the Brooklyn Bridge, Ebbets Field close to Bedford Avenue, Beauregard Square in New Orleans, Les Halles in Paris, Old Brompton Road in London) and temporal clues (before the Luftwaffe bombed London) in an attempt to create the illusion of identity between the fictional world and the real world of the reader, thus emphasizing the disquieting effect resulting from the distortion of spatial coordinates and the superimposition of an absurd series of events. The reality of the fictional dimension alters with the literalization of cultural clichés and metaphors. It transforms into a surreal 'zone' that continuously attempts to mediate order and chaos. The London episode offers a good example:

Now we stroll up Old Brompton Road, and the rains come again. I offer my umbrella to Maugham and he takes it, despite the fact he already has an umbrella. Maugham now carries two open umbrellas [...] Maugham pauses to buy and open a third umbrella. (286) [...] A gust of wind lifts Maugham off his feet and slams him into a building. He chuckles.⁹¹

The text is constructed on the dialectic of connection and separation. It simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the plausibility of reality and drives it to entropy by continuously vacillating between the real and the absurd, by extending the possible into the illogical. The overlapping of oppositional matrices is meant to accrete the meaning of the text by becoming the synecdoche of a disturbed and disturbing reality, and accounts

⁹¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 392.

for the ineluctable deficiencies of a world which fails to provide credible and meaningful landmarks. The usage of such fictional strategies results, of course, in the triumph of the absurd.

The absurd as the governing force of reality and existence dominates Woody Allen's fictional universe. As Marc S. Reisch explains, "Allen is an existential humorist. In the 1970s he is Camus, but with a sense of humor. All Allen's essays and literary plays are exercises in absurd creation."⁹² In "The Spring Bulletin", Woody Allen writes: "The Absurd: Why existence is often considered silly, particularly for men who wear brown-and-white shoes."⁹³ As Marc S. Reisch observes, Woody Allen wore brown-and-white shoes in the picture on the cover of the first edition of *Getting Even*, the volume in which "The Spring Bulletin" was first included, as well as in several of his films, such as *Bananas*, *Take the Money and Run*, and *Sleeper*. Woody Allen used to wear the same type of brown-and-white saddle shoes in several TV appearances. This is, of course, one of the several auctorial subtle engagements with the fictional universes he created.

Woody Allen's penchant for the absurd creation, traceable back to Camus, is shared by most postmodernist writers who use it "as an identified word for purpose of reference, as a framework for reflection, as a fictional matrix for the fictional design, or as atmospheric background for existential fears and needs."⁹⁴ This type of absurdist, surreal distortions as those described above are emblematic for the strategies of spatial representation and world construction in Woody Allen's short fiction. Still, in many cases, he takes things even further. For example, in "Above the Law, Below

⁹² Reisch, "Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist", 69.

⁹³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 201.

⁹⁴ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 209.

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the Box Springs" any possible real-world equivalence withdraws from the text from the very beginning, for he creates the setting of this absurd story with the interpolation of two outlandish elements between familiar spaces:

Wilton's Creek lies at the center of the Great Plains, north of Shepherd's Grove, to the left of Dobb's Point, and just about the bluffs that form Planck's constant. The land is arable and is found primarily on the ground. Once a year, the swirling winds from the Kinna Hurrah rip through the open fields, lifting farmers from their work and depositing them hundreds of miles to the south, where they often resettle and open boutiques.⁹⁵

While Wilton's Creek, the Great Plains, and Shepherd's Grove can be easily found on the map, the attempt is completely unsuccessful when looking for "the bluffs that form Planck's constant" or for "Kinna Hurrah rip". Through the use of geographic puns and references to quantum mechanics and the Jewish tradition, the construction of this implausible space goes beyond mere distortion. Planck's constant reflects the smallest scale on which the effects of quantum mechanics can be observed, thus introducing elements that do not belong to the spatial coordinates of classical physics. The other intrusive topographic reference points in a completely different direction. Kinna Hurrah, or Ken Ayin Hara, is Yiddish for "May there be no evil eye" and 'rip' can also refer to a dissolute person whose ceaseless use of the Kinna Hurrah incantation could cause the swirling wind effect. As logic is erased from the story at the very beginning, the narrated events can continue along the same lines, losing the schemata of conventional logic and hyperbolizing contemporary hysteria by means of Woody Allen's specific comic mode.

⁹⁵ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 133.

The geometry of overlapped dimensions culminates in Woody Allen's short fiction with "Surprise Rocks Disney Trial", which presents an excessive and fantastic fictional heterocosm, a celebration of the absurd, where, following the Baudrillardian 'formula', the real and the simulated merge, creating what Baudrillard defines "a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."⁹⁶ In his theory of contemporary Western culture, Jean Baudrillard calls for the need for a semiotic approach to understanding the new culture which emerged in a media-dominated society. In his opinion, this new culture has lost the sense of referentiality and is dominated by the simulated:

All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange: God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself but a gigantic simulacrum.⁹⁷

In "Surprise Rocks Disney Trial" Woody Allen collides the real and the simulated, effacing the boundaries between the two, exposing a reality in which Baudrillard's hyperreal assumes its full meaning. Allen toys with the permeability of fictional worlds, engaging what Gérard Genette defines as *narrative metalepsis*,⁹⁸ a violation of different narrative levels resulting in the transgression of ontological boundaries. Allen's text allows Mickey Mouse an ascending metaleptic journey. "Surprise Rocks Disney Trial" borrows the form of a courtroom transcript that registered Mickey

⁹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 2.

⁹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 6.

⁹⁸ Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, 235.

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Mouse's deposition in the trial of the Walt Disney Company suit against Michael Ovitz.⁹⁹ The formal mimicking of a serious real-life trial fuels the comic effect. Woody Allen writes:

Counsel: Will the witness please state his name.

Witness: Mickey Mouse.

C: Please tell the court your occupation.

W: Animated rodent.

C: Were you friendly with Michael Eisner?

W: I wouldn't say friendly—we had dinner together a number of times. Once he and his wife had Minnie and me to their house.¹⁰⁰

Mickey Mouse and his other animated colleagues have been given the opportunity to travel one ontological level up. Although Mickey Mouse is fully aware of his condition of "animated rodent," this does not prevent him from interacting with Steven Spielberg or Tom Cruise, or from attending the party which Barbara Streisand has thrown for Jiminy Cricket. The high permeability of ontological realms hastens the entropic process and allows for the creation of a world which is increasingly divorced from the 'real', a hopelessly illogical 'zone,' triumphant through misplaced identities.

The disorder of the narrated world, nurtured by recurrent references to real-life people and places and their interaction with animated cartoon characters, creates the strong illusion that reality has been corrupted, not by a fictional counterpart, but by its own regressive puerile imaginary which comes to question contemporary sanity and enhances the entropic process. This text seems to have been informed by what Fredric Jameson describes as the "hysterical sublime" when referring to the postmodern

⁹⁹ The trial occurred in reality.

¹⁰⁰ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 147.

spatial exploration of a world which “loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density.”¹⁰¹ The fictional world of the story is a bizarre, surreal, and implausible construct that translates Baudrillard’s theory according to which Disneyland is emblematic of the new simulated order representing American contemporary reality. According to Baudrillard, Disneyland functions as a “*simulation of the third order*”¹⁰² representing what he refers to as the third ‘phase of the image’, in which the image “masks the *absence* of a profound reality.”¹⁰³ In Woody Allen’s short story, the representation of the fictional world erases the boundaries between the real and the simulated; it turns the simulated into the real and contests the real by transforming it into one of the many possible variants of the simulated.

“The Kugelmass Episode”, the story that brought Woody Allen the O. Henry Award in 1978, is a more sophisticated example of ontological boundaries transgression. The short story emphasizes the importance of illusion for psychological survival while simultaneously exposing the delusional tendencies of human beings. Looking for an escape from his unhappy marriage and dull existence, Sidney Kugelmass, professor of humanities at City College of New York, enters Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary* and engages in an adulterous relationship with Emma Bovary, whom he repeatedly visits and even extracts her from her diegetic realm. The series of transtextual rendezvous is facilitated by Persky, a magician who has invented a magic box that renders the membrane of fictional realms permeable, thus allowing for the transgression of ontological levels. Both Kugelmass and Persky are

¹⁰¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26.

¹⁰² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 12.

¹⁰³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 6.

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punished at the end of the story: Persky for facilitating the disturbance of other fictional worlds and Kugelmass for adultery, misrepresentation of self, consumerism, and greed—in short, for Bovarism. The magic box is destroyed, Persky dies instantly of a heart attack, and Kugelmass, who was expecting to meet The Monkey in *Portnoy's Complaint*, meets his nemesis, the hairy and irregular verb *tener* (“to have”), in a Spanish textbook.¹⁰⁴ The main source of humor is the violation of fictional boundaries, perceived as commonplace by all of the inhabitants of Kugelmass's reality. This core scheme allows Allen to rework, exploit, and expose a number of literary strategies and conventions: metaleptic narratives, transworld identities, characters aware of their own fictionality, hubris, nemesis, and the Greek chorus.

Gérard Genette uses “The Kugelmass Episode” as an example of metaleptic narrative that combines humor and the fantastic.¹⁰⁵ Brian McHale noted that “The Kugelmass Episode” invites descending metaleptic journeys: the main character descends into the fictional world of Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, he goes down one ontological level, not up towards the real world of the reader.¹⁰⁶ “The Kugelmass Episode” also exemplifies hypertextuality, a type of transtextual relationship, defined by Genette as “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of the commentary.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 346-60.

¹⁰⁵ Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 88.

¹⁰⁶ McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 123.

¹⁰⁷ Gérard Genette. *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 5.

The story of Mr. Kugelmass is built around the scheme of interplaying texts, permeable fictional realms, and nested worlds, which proved fairly popular in postmodernist fiction. It is a 'borrower' text which features transworld characters¹⁰⁸ that preserve the same coordinates as their original. The hypertextual endeavor in this case consists not in quoting or alluding to the story's hypotext, but in entering the fictional world of *Madame Bovary* and disturbing Flaubert's fictional universe by extracting the main character from there. Kugelmass chooses to enter Flaubert's novel both because of the stereotypical allure of French lovers and because he is acquainted with Emma Bovary's adulterous predispositions. However, Allen's choice seems to have a different stake. He chose *Madame Bovary* not only because she belongs to that typology of characters that tempt writers to continuously multiply their destiny, but because her defining trait is symptomatic of the consumerist self: constructing one's identity through projecting fictitious images of oneself while being completely incapable of achieving this idealized version. These symptoms manifest in Mr. Kugelmass's behavior and testify to an axiological homogeneity between the hypotext and the hypertext, thus increasing the accessibility of the two fictional worlds and facilitating the obliteration of the boundaries between them. Kugelmass manifests the same kind of delusive enchantment

¹⁰⁸ Emma Bovary's presence in "The Kugelmass Episode" turns her into what Umberto Eco calls 'transworld identities', that is, identities which transgress ontological boundaries by encroaching upon a different territory and bringing along their 'essential properties' defined by Eco as those particular characteristics which make them identifiable and allow them to fulfill their intended purpose. See Eco, Umberto. *Lector in fabula: cooperarea interpretativă în sursele narrative*. Trans. Marina Spalas. (1979). București: Editura Univers, 1991.

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stemming from misrepresentation of oneself and the same incapability of emulating one's chosen model that are typical of Bovarism.¹⁰⁹ That the schizoid postmodern–consumerist identity is defined as an amalgam of 'the real self' and 'the projected self' is but the logical consequence of a world in which individual consciousness can no longer discern between the real and the simulated. Notions of authenticity and true-to-self identities are corrupted by a reality constructed on simulacra, simulation, and stimulation, which continuously generates artificial desires, thus defending the sovereignty of image and commodity. Bovarism, no longer exclusively the attribute of Flaubert's character, thus becomes a dominant feature of the postmodern consumerist society.

Woody Allen's use of spatiality and his world-building strategies represent both a disruption and a continuation of the techniques of modernist narrative. Allen manifests a strong propensity for opening up space and distorting conventions by incorporating entropy and chaos and aligning his 'zone' building strategies to the postmodern sense of the world which is, according to McHale, "restlessly plural."¹¹⁰ He often explores the manifoldness of postmodernist world-building strategies in order to create a captivating, but disjointed universe, which he populates with characters stumbling over its absurdities. His short fiction always explores plurality and the multiplicity of perspectives, but his play is never gratuitous; he always directs spatial disruptions as exploratory scripts supporting a continuous search for meaning, which helps his fiction transcend the mere comical effect and

¹⁰⁹ See the symptoms of the pathological manifestation of Bovarism in Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1930, 13–14.

¹¹⁰ Brian McHale. *Constructing Postmodernism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1992, 8.

absolves his writing of the 'anything goes' attitude. The illogical and absurd fictional world he builds testifies to the same existentialist aesthetic creed that governs his entire work: reality is absurd and not even the fictional reinvention of the world can make it meaningful. Therefore, both the real and the imaginary worlds are but an infinite source of disillusion.

2.2.2. Postmodern times

Time...

Experimenting with the construction of time and distorting conventional perceptions of temporality are popular postmodernist strategies. If nineteenth-century realist fiction operated with time as a Kantian *a priori* category, defined in terms of transition, sequentiality, and permanence, and modernist writers transformed the "mental interrelation of space and time" into "the hallmark of modernism,"¹¹¹ postmodernist writers work with time as a construct which continuously invites deconstruction and distortion. There are, of course, many examples of modernist writing in which the logic of causality is abolished and the perception of temporality deteriorates, but with postmodernist narratives, the "concepts of time [...] are multiple and contradictory."¹¹² In his analysis of postmodernist temporal strategies, Gerhard Hoffmann starts from the three "elemental models" that subsume the major conceptualizations of temporality: linear/ progressive time, circular/ cosmic time, and subjective/mental time.¹¹³ Hoffmann continues by exploring how

¹¹¹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 270.

¹¹² Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 277.

¹¹³ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 271.

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postmodernist fiction tackles the multiple valences of time concepts. Linear time becomes the main target of postmodernist writing and the multiplicity of temporal manifestations in postmodernist fiction is mainly directed toward deconstructing sequentiality and chronology. This is done, in Hoffmann's opinion, "in order to state the meaning of time, the loss of time, the end of time, and the void"¹¹⁴ and to "mark the ontological disruptions of the imaginative worlds."¹¹⁵ The cosmic order is transformed by writers who construct their texts as models for keeping "the system open"¹¹⁶ to intertextual relations and allowing the text to "return to the source, the origin."¹¹⁷ In the grand temporal scheme, the only way to "surmount time is [by means of] a combination of *myth* and *storytelling*."¹¹⁸ Postmodernist writers, however, do not rely on the cyclicity of nature.¹¹⁹ The subjective, mental time, explored in depth in modernist literature through the stream of consciousness and experienced as a psychological temporal continuum, finds new valences in postmodernist fiction. Correlated, in modernist fiction, with acquiring meaning and with the attainment of epiphanic relief, the process of inner exploration of temporality becomes, in postmodernist fiction, a "dubious experience, whose truth is partial at best."¹²⁰ Given its relative nature, it becomes subject to perspectivism.¹²¹

Woody Allen's short fiction often suspends temporal progression and reconfigures temporal coordinates so as to expose

¹¹⁴ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 280.

¹¹⁵ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 281.

¹¹⁶ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 324.

¹¹⁷ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 325.

¹¹⁸ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 325.

¹¹⁹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 326.

¹²⁰ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 332.

¹²¹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 332.

them in their artifice. However, his approach to temporality bears a particular imprint stemming from the sense of a continuous present. Marked by sheer anxiety toward the future and a somewhat uneasy relationship with the past, this attachment to the present reflects an understanding of time as dependent on the human mind. This attitude seems to further confirm Allen's allegiance to Hobbes's philosophy – signaled in the introduction to this work – by gesturing towards the Hobbesian understanding of time as imaginary. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes: "[t]he present only has a being in nature; things past have a being in the memory only; but things to come have no being at all, the future being but a fiction of the mind."¹²² In Allen's short fiction, this model of temporal conceptualization meets the typically postmodernist incredulity towards the 'grand narratives' of time. In "No Kaddish for Weinstein" Woody Allen writes: "here I am at some fixed point in time and space, taking a shower. I, Isaac Weinstein."¹²³ Here, what begins as a promise of profound ontological meditation ends in triviality, thus negating all possible ulterior meaning of temporal universal structures and parodying monumental discourses about the nature of being, traditionally defined in terms of temporal and spatial coordinates. In postmodernist fiction, the understanding of the notion of time as a construct and the exploitation of the difference between clock-time and subjective time make way for endless possibilities of distortion and reinvention and allow for randomness and the accidental to replace linearity and sequentiality.

Woody Allen toys with chaotic representations and uses distorted projections of time and space to emphasize the absurdity

¹²² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 17.

¹²³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 117.

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of the world he creates. For instance, the spatial misrepresentation and distortion in "Reminiscences: Places and People" is accompanied by an exercise of subverting causality and linearity through foreseeing a future built on an illogical sequence of events:

'Benny! Benny!' A mother is calling her son. Benny is sixteen but already has a police record. When he is twenty-six, he will go to the electric chair. At thirty-six, he will be hanged. At fifty, he will own his own dry-cleaning store.¹²⁴

Allen distorts the character's personal history in ways in which the conventional sequence of time would not allow it unless the electric chair malfunctions and the hanging rope breaks. Beyond the immediate comic effect of the haphazardly associated events that make the character's personal history, the dislocation of chronological order emphasizes the illogical nature of the world and discloses the artificiality of the diegetic act by dismantling any expectations of a reliable temporal perspective.

Woody Allen's tampering with causality and succession is incidental. He does not experiment with time in such spectacular manners as do writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, who mixes sequentiality and simultaneity and plays with the convergence and divergence of time; Donald Barthelme, who contracts mechanical succession to the point that it turns into mere lists; Martin Amis or Don DeLillo who decide to take reverse chronology to another level. Though he proved capable of playing with linearity and logical sequence, Woody Allen's interest lies in a different temporal model, explored for specific purposes. As briefly discussed above, he usually operates with the conventional trinity of past, present, and future, understood under Hobbesian influences.

¹²⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 389.

In Woody Allen's short fiction, the future bears a strong negative connotation because it is continuously associated with the imminence of death on a personal level, and extinction on a cosmic, universal level. The certainty of death and the chronic malaise derived from this sole certainty become the unifying forces of Woody Allen's entire work. With him, the anxiety of mortality is turned into the all-encompassing dimension of being and therefore the passage of time only represents what Boris Yelnikoff, the main character in *Whatever Works* calls "a step closer to the grave."¹²⁵ If Woody Allen's films can still tackle the idea of projecting the future (*Sleeper* is a good example of a future dystopia), in his fiction, all attempts to escape this doomed vision surrender to the only certainty about what the future withholds.

Woody Allen can only envision the future through fear, anxiety, and concern. In "Selection from the Allen Notebooks" he writes: "Still obsessed by thoughts of death, I brood constantly. I keep wondering if there is an afterlife, and if there is, will they be able to break a twenty?"¹²⁶ The obsession with the thought of death reverberates through his entire fiction, always accompanied by the comic twist of the phrase which places it within the dialectic of sheer anxiety and black comedy. The indubitable threat of the future gains apocalyptic dimensions and extends to a cosmic scale when, in "My Speech to the Graduates" he writes: "More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."¹²⁷ The same

¹²⁵ *Whatever Works*. By Woody Allen. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Larry David. 2009. Film.

¹²⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 8.

¹²⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 363.

outlook informs "The Condemned", where Allen writes, in the same comic-ironic manner: "Nothing lasts. Even the works of the great Shakespeare will disappear when the universe burns out – not such a terrible thought, of course, when it comes to a play like *Titus Andronicus*, but what about the others?"¹²⁸ The reference to Shakespeare in "The Condemned" exposes the notion of immortality through art as obsolete and unable to attend to contemporary realities.¹²⁹ The change of the cultural paradigm dissolved the romantic ivory tower of the artist, and the myth of immortality through art disintegrated under the corrosive effect of the contemporary cultural order. The artistic product is challenged with the perspective of its own impermanence; as Marcel Duchamp noted, "the thing to do is try to make a painting that will be alive in your own lifetime."¹³⁰ Therefore, Woody Allen's distrust becomes a reaction to the realities of the twentieth-century culture, and his skepticism is empirically legitimated. His attitude is epitomized by one of his most famous aphorisms: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work... I want to achieve it through not dying."¹³¹ Art does not offer a solution for his concern with mortality; at best, it provides a temporary escape from the harshness of reality.

The ominous nature of the future translates the passage of time into a catastrophic process. Therefore, the temporal dominant

¹²⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 313.

¹²⁹ The awareness of this reality also haunts Renata, one of the main characters of Woody Allen's *Interiors*, a poet "depressed by the clear consciousness that the immortality some of her poems might have is not at all a compensation for her own mortality." Hösle, *Woody Allen*, 77.

¹³⁰ Quoted in David Hopkins. *After Modern Art 1945-2000*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 38.

¹³¹ Quoted in Paul MacInnes. "It's a good week for ... One-liners." *The Guardian*. 17 September 2011. Online. Accessed on 12 February 2013.

of Woody Allen's short fiction is the present, just as the setting is urban. Allen usually anchors his narrative in the present through the confessional mode of discourse. At times, he also uses fragmentation in order to suspend temporality and conceives his texts as collages of ideas, unified by a common theme or a narrative voice that keeps all the threads together. "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" is such a collage-text, composed of the scattered thoughts, concerns, and ideas of a narrator who, as the title invites us to assume, claims identity with the author. It is shaped by the use of disparate fragments pertaining to quotidian, urban life, islanded among a wide spectrum of inner existentialist cogitations. The text follows in the good tradition of postmodernist fiction's propensity for eclecticism and fragmentation, with which deep existential concerns are attenuated by ironical and parodical detachment.

As is the case with several other texts, the internal organization of "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" is designed to collapse linear meaning into what Mark Currie sees as "the compressed time of a perpetual present,"¹³² a paraphrase of Fredric Jameson's argument. According to Jameson, one of the major features of postmodernism consists of its "peculiar way with time,"¹³³ which he discusses in terms of the Lacanian theory of schizophrenia. Jameson argues that postmodern culture has a "schizophrenic structure" built on images and simulacra, which causes the "weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality."¹³⁴

¹³² Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. 2nd edition. New York: 1998. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 107.

¹³³ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 6.

¹³⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.

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This new form of private temporality is the "perpetual present". In his essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" Jameson elaborates on the same idea claiming that "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve."¹³⁵ As can be seen in the following subsection, Woody Allen's temporal regressions and the ways in which he processes the past are also directed toward strengthening the sense of a present continuum.

... and time again

The playful revisitation and reinvention of the past, through the deconstruction and reconstruction of history, are central preoccupations of postmodernism. Postmodernist fiction pluralizes history, without aiming at historical accuracy or entertainment, but in an attempt to emphasize the diversity of perspectives and the unreliability of the grand narratives.¹³⁶ According to Fredric Jameson, the sense of historical time has undergone a series of transformations caused by "the new depthlessness" typical of the "new culture of the image or the simulacra," governed by a spatial, rather than a temporal logic.¹³⁷ As Jameson argues, "[t]he past is thereby itself modified" and retrospective explorations result in "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum."¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 11.

¹³⁶ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 49.

¹³⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.

¹³⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

Woody Allen's temporal regressions and the use of the past in his fiction reconfirm the loss of historical and temporal depth and are directed towards reinforcing the sense of a perpetual present, as discussed in the previous subsection. In his fiction, the present is not degraded, but represents a satisfactory moment of being alive, and all temporal regressions are performed as part of the quest for meaning: not some transcendent timeless meaning, but rather as a dialectical process similar to what Linda Hutcheon describes as "a reevaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present."¹³⁹ In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explores what she considers the dominant feature of postmodernist fiction: its interest in querying "the relation of both history to reality and reality to language."¹⁴⁰ By emphasizing postmodernist fiction's (primarily the novel's) self-referential focus and its preoccupation with revisiting history, Hutcheon uses the term "historiographic metafiction" to refer to all critical revisions of the past. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction relates to the past by destabilizing the exclusive truth claim of history and by exposing it as discourse.¹⁴¹ Postmodernist literary texts set out to mirror the realities of the culture that produced them and to simultaneously challenge past events, their conventional apprehension, and the plausibility of historical truth.

Hutcheon's is not the only attempt to conceptualize the relation of postmodernist fiction to the past, to historiography, and previous literary forms. Michael Orlofsky defines the term "historiografiction" as a postmodernist blend of historiography and fiction, used to "denote the literary treatment of persons or

¹³⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 15.

¹⁴¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 93.

events from the past."¹⁴² Orlofsky develops this term and applies it to the specific context of the short story in his exploration of the critical attitude of postmodernist short fiction towards history and the past. As Orlofsky explains, "[p]ostmodernism is history's self-fulfilled prophecy. One of postmodernism's diagnostic traits is its use of historic forms, texts, periods, and characters to a new purpose."¹⁴³ Orlofsky acknowledges Jameson's perspective on the artists' being forced to accept "the failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past,"¹⁴⁴ but he resolves it in a manner reminiscent of the Barthian understanding of the 'exhaustion' and 'usedupness' of literary forms, by arguing that "is not necessarily a bad thing. The past was a big place, a lot of people lived there. That is a lot of stories, as well as a lot of perspectives on the floodtide of history."¹⁴⁵

Undoubtedly, postmodernist fiction is preoccupied both with revisiting and with (re)writing history, and Woody Allen's short fiction is no exception. He operates with past forms and events from a playful postmodernist position and directs these efforts to his attempt at making sense of the present. Allen is not a melancholy writer, he is not stuck in the past, nor trying to reconnect with a lost Paradise of yore. In an interview about one of his latest films, *Midnight in Paris*, in which he explores the topos of nostalgic temporal regressions, Woody Allen clearly articulates his perspective on the past and his allegiance to the present:

¹⁴² Michael Orlofsky. "Historiographiction: The Fictionalization of History in the Short Story." *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. Eds. Farhat Iftekharrudin and et al. Westport, Connecticut & London: Praeger, 2003. 47-62, 47.

¹⁴³ Orlofsky, "Historiografiction", 47.

¹⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Orlofsky, "Historiografiction", 49.

I'm not happy with the time here, but I wouldn't be happier then either, cause... I'm not that happy in general, so, whenever I lived, I would be unhappy... you know... that life itself is a very unhappy experience and... so it really doesn't matter when you live. The... the cosmetics change, but the problems remain the same, so... I'm fine where I am now. I don't think I'd be any happier if I lived in the Twenties or the Thirties or hundred years from now... you know.¹⁴⁶

In *Midnight in Paris*, Woody Allen works revisiting the past more than anywhere else in his work. *Midnight in Paris* is not a nostalgic film, but a film about nostalgia as a dominant human feature, common to all ages, to all present moments. As Woody Allen subtly points out by means of a temporal *mise-en-abîme* technique, in each period, be it the present of contemporary society, the Roaring Twenties (or the French "*années folles*"), the Belle Époque or that of The Gilded Age, individuals will always exhibit a tendency of valuing the past above their own present. Therefore, dissatisfaction with an assumingly degraded present and nostalgia for a past golden age are exposed as common human features, unrelated to a specific contemporaneity. Moreover, temporality is not perceived as sequential and evolutionary, but rather as a juxtaposition of present moments characterized by the same nostalgic outlook.

Film reviews relate *Midnight in Paris* to "A Twenties Memory," a short story included in the 1971 volume, *Getting Even*, originally published in *Chicago Daily News* under the title "How I Became a Comedian." The narrator of "A Twenties Memory," a writer himself, recounts his experiences with some of the most celebrated modernist writers and artists: spending a winter with

¹⁴⁶ Woody Allen and Owen Wilson. "Interview about *Midnight in Paris*". with Jonathan Ross. *Cinemoi*. 13 May 2011. Online. Accessed on 17 May 2012.

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Picasso and Alice Toklas in the South of France, having his nose repeatedly broken by Hemingway, or discussing his talent with Gertrude Stein. "A Twenties Memory" evokes and simultaneously parodies the bohemian atmosphere of the Twenties and captures the idiosyncrasies of the Lost Generation, transforming them through the ironical, the absurd, and the grotesque. In a very postmodernist manner, Woody Allen mocks the modernist attitude towards art through literalization, which leads to grotesque exaggeration:

Juan Gris, the Spanish cubist, had convinced Alice Toklas to pose for a still life and, with his typical abstract conception of objects, began to break her face and body down to its basic geometrical forms until the police came and pulled him off.¹⁴⁷

Each fictional equivalent of the real-life artists and writers who populate Allen's short story is caricaturally distorted starting from an easily recognizable personality trait. For instance, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's lifestyle is described as follows:

They had consumed nothing but champagne for the past three months, and one previous week, in full evening dress, had driven their limousine off a ninety-foot cliff into the ocean on a dare. There was something real about the Fitzgeralds; their values were basic.¹⁴⁸

Allen thus recuperates the cultural past from an ironic position, mocking and deconstructing the stereotypes associated with the cultural blooming of the Twenties and ridiculing the modernist aesthetic elitism as opposed to the popular culture of the second half of the twentieth century. The original title of the short story, "How I Became a Comedian," points in the same

¹⁴⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 234.

¹⁴⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 235.

direction. From Gertrude Stein's point of view, the narrator has no talent:

In the afternoons, Gertrude Stein and I used to go antique hunting in the local shops, and I remember once asking her if she thought I should become a writer. In the typically cryptic way we were all so enchanted with, she said, 'No.' I took that to mean yes and sailed for Italy the next day.¹⁴⁹

On the other hand, from his perspective, her opinion is overrated:

Both Gertrude Stein and I examined Picasso's newest works very carefully, and Gertrude Stein was of the opinion that 'art, all art, is merely an expression of something.' Picasso disagreed and said, 'Leave me alone. I was eating.' My own feelings were that Picasso was right. He had been eating.¹⁵⁰

Allen approaches the highbrow, elitist outlook of modernism in a parodically exaggerated postmodernist paradoxical manner; he both instates and overthrows the modernist attitude towards art. On one hand, his irony and fundamental skepticism distance him from the modernist view on art. This praxis is one of the fundamental dominants of postmodernism. As Linda Hutcheon explains, postmodernism tackles "the notion of the work of art as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object deriving its unity from the formal interrelations of its parts" by simultaneously asserting and undercutting "this view in its characteristic attempt to retain aesthetic autonomy while still returning the text to the 'world.'"¹⁵¹ On the other hand, Allen's excess in parodying modernist artistic thought coupled with the crudeness of his narrator invite the

¹⁴⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 233.

¹⁵⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 234.

¹⁵¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 125.

reading of this short story as a parody of postmodernist approaches to previous aesthetic attitudes.

Another revisionist leap is performed in "My Apology". As the title announces, the text is meant to continue the series of Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of the speech Socrates gave during his trial, in an attempt to defend himself against the charges that ultimately led to his conviction. In "My Apology", the last moments of Socrates' life are framed by a dream which allows the narrator to assume Socrates' role. The text begins with an introduction in the form of a first-person confessional narrative and then transforms into a play, with dialogues interrupted by stage direction. In a metafictional game associated with temporal misattribution, Socrates is here replaced by a character called Allen, which creates an ontological leap effect and models the narrator's direct participation in the fictional dialogue by putting him "in this great philosopher's sandals."¹⁵² The reason for revisiting Socrates' last moments lies, as expected, in an attempt to explore different ways of understanding authenticity, finding meaning, and coping with death. As Allen, the character-narrator, confessed,

the great appeal for me of this wisest of all Greeks was his courage in the face of death. [...] In the end, Socrates' brave death gave his life authentic meaning; something my existence lacks totally, although it does possess a minimal relevance to the Internal Revenue Department.¹⁵³

Reality and temporality are pictured as layers of existence organized by the axial concern with death, which allows for overlaps and substitution. Allen treats the last moments of

¹⁵² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 335.

¹⁵³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 335.

Socrates not as a historical event, but rather as an opportunity for reconsidering the philosophical significance of existential ideals through a contemporary perspective. The text distrusts the promise of immortality gained through a Socratic death; this is no longer a plausible scenario in a society where martyrdom had lost its redeeming power. Fear of death is far greater than any grand philosophical principles. Allen deconstructs the idealistic attitude towards existence by exposing it as a mere opportunistic discourse with a financial finality:

AGATHON: But it was you who proved that death doesn't exist.

ALLEN: Hey, listen-I've proved a lot of things. That's how I pay my rent. Theories and little observations. A puckish remark now and then. Occasional maxims. It beats picking olives, but let's not get carried away.

AGATHON: But you have proved many times that the soul is immortal.

ALLEN: And it is! On paper. See, that's the thing about philosophy-it's not all that functional once you get out of class.¹⁵⁴

Heroism is diluted, undone, and exposed as an indefinable notion. The honor and dignity in Plato's or Xenophon's *Apology* are replaced by cowardice, anxiety, and the admittance of the emptiness of grand philosophical principles and discourses, which no longer hold. Allen's reinterpretation of Socrates' last moments corrodes the grandeur of Socrates' final gesture, thus emphasizing the incongruence between the idealized Socratic death and contemporary values. As Emily Wilson points out, nowadays "[p]hilosophy is just an academic subject, not a mode of life and death – in contrast to what Seneca, Montaigne, or Voltaire might have hoped."¹⁵⁵ In her study, *The Death of Socrates*, she concludes

¹⁵⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 340-41.

¹⁵⁵ Emily Wilson. *The Death of Socrates*. London: Profile Books, 2007, 207.

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that the late twentieth century has lost interest in the ideal of Socratic death and has the tendency to represent it in a simplified, often trivial manner. Wilson argues that this attitude can be explained by the modern inability to cope with death by associating a mythical dimension to the act of dying.

"My Apology" is an exploration of the present, exploiting the notion of co-presence. It is not a projection back in time, but it drags the past into a perpetual present through a common concern: coping with death. The text is configured as a satire on contemporary society in which "*some eggs and smoked salmon*"¹⁵⁶ are much more efficient in calming down a soul disturbed by the fear of dying than any type of philosophical gesture. It builds a sense of incredulity around the myth of the death of Socrates, which became implausible through a late capitalist perspective.

Probably the most accomplished and poignant approach to historical events in Woody Allen's fiction is "The Schmeed Memoirs." Here Allen decides to approach the tragic legacy of World War II by revisiting the story of the Third Reich from an insider's perspective. Allen's text is a reaction to *The Kersten Memoirs* written by Felix Kersten, Heinrich Himmler's masseur. The controversial self-assumed heroic dimension of Kersten's actions is completely effaced by Allen's narrative. "The Schmeed Memoirs" recounts the events through the perspective of Friedrich Schmeed, "*the best-known barber in wartime Germany*" who "*provided tonsorial services for Hitler and many highly placed government and military officials.*"¹⁵⁷ Schmeed's story discloses an absurd and illogical world in which the Fuehrer and his high officials act as

¹⁵⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 343. Italics in the original.

¹⁵⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 161. Italics in the original.

spoiled, hysterical children fighting over who gets their hair cut on the hobbyhorse.

In only seven pages, Woody Allen captures the major events that occurred inside the Third Reich between 1940 and 1945 and translates them into tonsorial affairs. Hess' running away to the United Kingdom in May 1941 is described as fleeing to Scotland with Hitler's bottle of Vitalis in order "to give Churchill a scalp treatment in an effort to end the war."¹⁵⁸ The failure of the plot to assassinate the Fuehrer is also encoded in hairdressing vocabulary, as follows:

In January of 1945, a plot by several generals to shave Hitler's mustache in his sleep and proclaim Doenitz the new leader failed when von Stauffenberg, in the darkness of Hitler's bedroom, shaved off one of the Fuehrer's eyebrows instead.¹⁵⁹

An anachronism crept into the retelling of the assassination plot, which took place on July 20, 1944. Given Woody Allen's erudition, this is probably not a mistake, but a premeditated change meant to contest the validity of historical truth. "The Schmeed Memoirs" captures Goering's erratic behavior, Hitler's megalomaniac outbursts and his close relationship with Bormann, as well as the change in attitude towards the end of the war, rendered in one intensely ironic phrase: "The Allied armies were closing in on Berlin, and Hitler felt that if the Russians got there first, he would need a full haircut but if the Americans did, he could get by with a light trim."¹⁶⁰

The employment of tonsorial vocabulary imprints the text with the frivolous, the farcical, and the absurd, but also invites the

¹⁵⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 165.

¹⁵⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 165.

¹⁶⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 165.

exploration of a more profound, tragic layer of significance. For instance, the tactical military decisions to launch the attack against the Soviet Union becomes a matter of growing sideburns: "General Staff, said it was a mistake to try to grow sideburns on two fronts at once and advised that it would be wiser to concentrate all efforts on one good sideburn. Hitler said he could do it on both cheeks simultaneously."¹⁶¹ The choice of the symbolism of growing and cutting sideburns and mustaches is not random, at least not for a Jewish writer. In the Jewish tradition, men are forbidden to shave their beards and the sides of their heads by an Old Testament commandment. Sideburns are a symbol of faith for the Jews, and German Nazis used to cut them off. As Mati Alon explains, "[c]utting a Jew's side-burns is an insult, vicious, inconsiderate and total disrespect for the Jewish religion."¹⁶² In this light, the rivalry between Hitler and Churchill over sideburns, as described in "The Schmeed Memoirs", gains new valence; it gives the text a tragic underlayer and allows its harrowing dimension to surface.

In "The Schmeed Memoirs" sheer irony attacks atrocity, and the world's greatest tragedy is presented as the action of hysterical and emotionally unstable individuals whose behavior is absurd and irrational. Although written as a humorous text, the story's tragic dimension is emphasized by the very mechanisms used to create the comic effect. Moreover, bringing together human comedy and human tragedy is a common denominator of the Jewish humorous tradition and a fairly common technique among Jewish writers. Although Woody Allen revisits and disarms the Third Reich through humor, his approach does not minimize the importance of the events he describes, nor does it deny their

¹⁶¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 163-4.

¹⁶² Mati Alon. *Holocaust and Redemption*. Victoria, Canada: Trafford, 2003.

historical weight. His reinterpretation of the World War II events through parody might attenuate the immediate emotional response, but it simultaneously heightens its reality and potentiates its gravity since the internal policy of the short story relies on the acute criticism of the absurdities of the war. Most Jewish writers deal with the atrocities of the war in a direct manner; they explore the tragedy from within, using a multitude of perspectives which range from direct confrontation of historical events to fathoming the drama of the survivors, and to the refusal to deal with the traumata. Woody Allen chooses to explore it as the symptom of an absurd world.

In his analysis of the perception of the Holocaust in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard dwells on the dialectic between authentic historical memory and the mediated relation with history and past events, which tends to render individuals immune to the emotional charge of a historical event. In Baudrillard's opinion, the recurrent exposure of the public, be it Jewish or Gentile, to the atrocity of the Holocaust results in a form of immunization, an attenuation of emotions which eventually leads to the obliteration and the annihilation of the reality of the event. In Jean Baudrillard's words,

one no longer makes the Jews pass through the crematorium or the gas chamber, but through the sound track and image track, through the universal screen and the microprocessor. Forgetting, annihilation, finally achieves its aesthetic dimension in this way - it is achieved in retro, finally elevated here to a mass level.¹⁶³

This perspective legitimizes Woody Allen's choice in tackling World War II. His approach allows for emotional detachment and makes room for the deployment of irony and sarcasm. He relegates

¹⁶³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 48.

the major events of World War II to the trivial, parodical discourse. The past is not only recontextualized, but reinvented in a stylized absurdist simulation. He respects the historical truth as long as it serves him for the game of references on which he built the comic effect; the truth value of the story, on the other hand, is not his major preoccupation. He seems much more concerned with reinventing and subsuming history to the absurdity and meaninglessness of the present. According to Woody Allen, the tragedy of World War II cannot be legitimized and represents the result of irrational actions performed by unstable individuals acting in a meaningless, absurd world.

Woody Allen relates to history in a specific postmodernist manner. He views history as a discourse that mediates access to the past. His distrust of the scientific accuracy of historical accounts is clearly articulated in texts such as "The Scrolls", where he describes an archaeological discovery as follows:

The authenticity of the scrolls is currently in great doubt, particularly since the word "Oldsmobile" appears several times in the text, and the few fragments that have finally been translated deal with familiar religious themes in a more than dubious way. Still, excavationist A. H. Bauer has noted that even though the fragments seem totally fraudulent, this is probably the greatest archeological find in history with the exception of the recovery of his cuff links from a tomb in Jerusalem.¹⁶⁴

The amusing, but unreliable representation of historical findings challenges the conventional verisimilitude of historical truths and exposes the fictional nature of history by breaking the pompous narrative of the archeological discovery with anachronisms. He

¹⁶⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 33.

thus contributes to the postmodernist effort to disintegrate the grand narratives of history.

Woody Allen also parodies history as an academic field. In the "Spring Bulletin", he describes the curricula of the discipline as relative, impressionistic, and completely lacking scientific exactness:

History of European Civilization: Ever since the discovery of a fossilized eohippus in the men's washroom at Siddo's Cafeteria in East Rutherford, New Jersey, it has been suspected that at one time Europe and America were connected by a strip of land that later sank or became East Rutherford, New Jersey, or both. This throws a new perspective on the formation of European society and enables historians to conjecture about why it sprang up in an area that would have made a much better Asia. Also studied in the course is the decision to hold the Renaissance in Italy.¹⁶⁵

Its fictional character having been proven, history continuously invites revision, reinterpretation, and reinvention through memory and creative investment. As Linda Hutcheon put it when describing the postmodern attitude towards the past, historiographic metafiction "does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events."¹⁶⁶ Woody Allen's short stories do not gather up historical events with the purpose of reenactment or nostalgic revision. They explore the exposure of the individual to time, following a cyclical process of gathering experience, but this revisitation fails to provide much comfort. The lack of a usable past triggers the need to invest in a perpetual present, in the desperate attempt to postpone a future overshadowed by the incontrovertible factuality of death. This becomes the organizing principle of temporality in Woody Allen's short fiction.

¹⁶⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 200.

¹⁶⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 154.

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In *Seems Like Old Times. Postmodern Nostalgia in Woody Allen's Work* Britta Feyerabend proposes an interesting approach to Woody Allen's work. She builds a strong case by exploring the multiple implications of the complex notion of postmodern nostalgia in some of Woody Allen's films, plays, and short stories. While Britta Feyerabend presents a series of insightful and convincing interpretations of Woody Allen's films, her approach to the selection of short stories can benefit from nuancing. Feyerabend begins her argument by claiming that nostalgia offers the pivotal stability that helps the individual adjust to an unsatisfactory present and accept the uncertainty of the future. In Feyerabend's words,

it is through the use of nostalgia that human beings actually reconnect to history through the use of memory and thus stabilize their hitherto uncertain universe. Whether one's knowledge or recollection of the past is correct or not, the fact that we feel nostalgic about the past, whether our lived past or beyond, shows that we want to remake and reconstruct a past that was safe and stable in order to stabilize our present and future.¹⁶⁷

This argument bears some validity, especially in Woody Allen's films, but nostalgia fails to offer comfort in the case of Woody Allen's short fiction. Often, the exploration of the past acts as a catalyst for distress since neither conventional nor personal history can provide any transcendent meaning to stabilize the present. In her demonstration, Feyerabend includes examples from Woody Allen's short fiction which, in my opinion, do not fully serve the purpose of her argument. For example, she sees detective Lupowitz from "The Whore of Mensa" (the same detective who also appears in "Mr. Big") as "the embodiment of nostalgia

¹⁶⁷ Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 34.

itself."¹⁶⁸ Feyerabend claims that "in terms of crisis, he is sought to provide the answers; he is the personified past which can attribute structure and meaning to a confusing and irregular present."¹⁶⁹ While the figure of detective Kaiser Lupowitz might be legitimately considered a 'Bogart figure' and can be used to trigger the recollection of the particular type of atmosphere of film noir, my contention is that he reminds more of C. W. Briggs, the detective played by Woody Allen in his film *The Curse of the Jade Scorpion* and that his role in the short stories is to parody and expose the conventions of formula fiction. This is most visible in "Mr. Big", where Kaiser Lupowitz solves the most difficult case in the history of detective cases in the blink of an eye. The surprisingly rapid solving of the case functions as an exaggeration of the detective's skills and ingenuity, which is meant to expose the artificiality of the recipe used to create the incredibly successful detectives of hardboiled fiction. Moreover, as Maurice Yacowar noted, "consistent with Allen's parody and ironic undercutting is the tendency of his prose to center around extremely unheroic figures that assume heroic stances."¹⁷⁰ Therefore, it seems much more appropriate to look at the detectives of Woody Allen's stories as being related to C. W. Briggs, the freckled, short, erratically behaving Little Man, displaying daring and gallant behavior.

Another text chosen by Britta Feyerabend to argue her position is "My Apology". She claims that

the narrator here unleashes his most private nostalgia, wishfully longing to be someone from the past, to be someone with a moral integrity he himself does not possess, while, through the reference

¹⁶⁸ Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 122.

¹⁶⁹ Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 122.

¹⁷⁰ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 86.

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to the IRS, criticizing his present existence and criticizing the modern American state of affairs.¹⁷¹

As mentioned above in my analysis of Woody Allen's "My Apology," my contention is that the exploration of what it would feel like to be in Socrates' sandals is triggered by a sense of curiosity and by the need to verify possible solutions which would help reconcile the individual with the awareness of his mortal condition, rather than nostalgia. The text is a reevaluation of the past 'in the light of the present,' to borrow Linda Hutcheon's phrase, and it demonstrates the implausibility of a heroic past scenario in the present world. In doing that, the text does, indeed, point towards the shortcomings of the contemporary American realities, but it represents an ironical factual observation and not a nostalgic attempt to restore an idyllic past.

In her approach to Woody Allen's "The Lunatic's Tale", Britta Feyerabend sees the desire of Dr. Ossip Parkis to create a perfect woman as a "nostalgic longing for a perfect creature, which he expects to be 'out there somewhere.'" Feyerabend continues by claiming that "Parkis wants, in the words of Svetlana Boym, to 'romance ... the past', which is the past of an ideal he thinks he can recreate just like Dr. Frankenstein and he defines himself through his longing."¹⁷² In the subsection entitled "Love in the Time of Postmodernism", I subsume the experience of Dr. Ossip Parkis to the romantic paradigm of Woody Allen's short fiction and I choose to discuss the text as a distorted case of the Pygmalion effect, meant to comment on the impracticability of mythical thinking and reveal the pathological exacerbation of desire in contemporary society.

¹⁷¹ Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 147.

¹⁷² Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 138.

Although Britta Feyerabend offers an overall compelling interpretation of Woody Allen's work, I cannot completely subscribe to her approach to his short stories. Nevertheless, when she concludes her study and emphasizes the nuances of her interpretation, her perspective gains more validity for Woody Allen's short fiction. Feyerabend claims that

For Allen, it does not suffice to go back to an old life, to reminisce about childhood, or to be simply nostalgic about one's own past, but he urges to be critically aware of the pitfalls and pratfalls of nostalgia, to constantly ask oneself at which moment one deludes oneself to feel nostalgic when one actually should feel dystalgic^[173] about the past, and to always have a critical distance to revered historic personae.¹⁷⁴

The emphasis on the critical distance to history and the past is essential in understanding the temporality of Woody Allen's short fiction. My contention is that his fiction is nostalgic inasmuch as nostalgia is inherent to postmodernism's tendency to reevaluate past forms by means of parody and pastiche, but lingering on the past and taking refuge in past experiences are not characteristic of Woody Allen's writing. Even when he appears to assume such a position, he approaches it from an ironic and deconstructionist stance. Woody Allen's imagination transfigures the past only as an attempt to make sense of the present, but, as seen above, the past fails to offer any mitigating solutions for the existential conundrums that haunt Woody Allen's main characters.

¹⁷³ Dystalgia is defined by Britta Feyerabend as "a negatively experienced nostalgia, as a longing for the past which on some level ... is problematic, contested, or ambivalent" (27).

¹⁷⁴ Feyerabend, *Seems Like Old Times*, 245.

Thus passes the glory of mythical time

I began the subchapter on temporal constructions in Woody Allen's short fiction with a discussion underpinned by Gerhard Hoffmann's perspective on how the three elemental models that subsume the major conceptualizations of temporality are transformed by postmodernist fiction. As explained above, Woody Allen's short stories represent, to a remarkable degree, the postmodernist tendency of tampering with both progressive/historical and subjective time. Universal, mythical time is subjected to a treatment similar to that of the historical past. Allen manifests a specifically postmodern appetite for deconstructing mythical discourses. In postmodernist fiction, mythologies do not survive close examination since myths fall under the broad category of master narratives. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism "argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any the less illusory."¹⁷⁵ The postmodern awareness of the "illusion making tendency of historiography"¹⁷⁶ questions and corrodes the structure of the belief system that used to substantiate conventions, myths, and all-encompassing discourses by accepting and cultivating confusion and uncertainty.

In postmodernist fiction, myths and fairy tales have a similar faith as history and are often processed through parody or pastiche. For example, Barthelme's *Snow White* turns the famous fairy tale into an opportunity to tackle twentieth-century social problems, while Woody Allen unleashes his exuberant comic imagination in order to strip myths of their monumental dimension and expose them for mere deceptive discourses that fail

¹⁷⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, 16.

to provide any existential meaning or explanation. In "Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts" Woody Allen populates invented mythologies with hypertrophied figures and absurd events. He ridicules myths and mythological figures and associates them with frivolous superstitions. For instance, in the part about the nurk, one of his fictional mythical beasts, he writes: "Persian mythology holds that if a nurk appears on the window sill in the morning a relative will either come into money or break both legs at a raffle."¹⁷⁷ Woody Allen also mocks the artistic representations of myths by misattributing to composer Franz von Holstein an opera named after an Austrian dish made of boiled beef: "Some readers may be acquainted with a lesser-known opera by Holstein called *Taffelspitz*, in which a mute girl falls in love with a nurk, kisses it, and they both fly around the room till the curtain falls."¹⁷⁸ The author explicitly attacks the epiphanic dimension of myths and legends when telling the story of Emperor Ho Sin whose nose was bit by a nightingale: "From this Ho Sin learned the secret of life, and it was 'Never to yodel.'"¹⁷⁹ With Allen, there's no mythical age to invite returns. The outsized dimension of myths is exposed in its rhetorical emptiness precisely because they cannot provide the transcendent meaning that their very nature seems to promise. With Allen, postmodernist relativism destabilizes mythical thinking and myth-derived discourses.

2.2.3. The many faces of the "Allen self"

When it comes to the configuration of the self, theorists broadly agree that postmodernist fiction exhibits a strong tendency

¹⁷⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 93.

¹⁷⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 93.

¹⁷⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 94.

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towards fragmenting and de-centering the self and the individual consciousness. In Linda Hutcheon's words, most postmodernist writers "challenge the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it."¹⁸⁰ Richard Poirier argues that, in postmodernist fiction, "[t]he techniques that emerge ... get to be more interesting than do characters themselves" and "[c]haracters become the passive receptors of phenomena from outside; they become all ears, listening to the sounds of voices, noises from the street, literary parodies and emulations, music."¹⁸¹ Peter Currie also insists on the decenteredness of the self in postmodernist fiction:

The constituent elements of the postmodern text seldom integrate thematically nor do the characters cohere psychologically; discontinuities of narrative and disjunctions of personality cannot overcome – as they often can with canonical Modernism, however scrambled or unstructured character or text may first appear – by an appeal to a logic of a unifying 'symbolic' metalanguage, a dominant stable discourse, settled hierarchy or the consistency of a core self.¹⁸²

Woody Allen approaches the construction of subjectivity in a different manner. He places his stake on using all the "phenomena from outside" to build a consciousness whose development can be traced throughout his entire fiction and distinguishes it from the general psychological incoherence generally attributed to characters in postmodernist fiction. A close reading of Woody Allen's short stories reveals an emerging

¹⁸⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics*, xii.

¹⁸¹ Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, 9.

¹⁸² Peter Currie, "The Eccentric Self", 54.

psychological pattern that points to a unique, coherent consciousness. This core self draws on the figure of the *schlemiel*, processed through Allen's strong existentialist concerns, and defined by the fear of death and an assiduous quest for meaning. For Woody Allen, death is the only certainty in a world that has discarded the master narratives. The fear of dying becomes the ultimate drive pushing the individual towards an endless search for mitigating solutions. His entire fiction can be construed starting from this fundamental scheme. He preserves a certain responsibility to the self – most likely as an attempt to fight off the fragmenting and disintegrating tendencies of a meaningless universe – and strives to achieve a sense of authenticity specific to existentialism rather than postmodernist philosophy.

The pervading influence of existentialism can be easily traced in American post-war literature, in the texts of authors such as Philip Roth or John Updike. Following in this tradition, Woody Allen's short fiction tackles the absence of absolutes in existentialist terms. Although postmodernist philosophy and theory (Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson) announced the de-centeredness of the world, the replacement of the real by the simulated, the impossibility of authenticity, and the "'death of the subject' or, to say it in more conventional language, the end of individualism as such,"¹⁸³ Woody Allen's short fiction remains faithful to the existentialist tradition to a large extent, especially when it comes to building a sense of authenticity.

Woody Allen's work is abundant in philosophical references, discussed in the introduction to this book. The Hobbesian understanding of human life as "solitary, poor, nasty,

¹⁸³ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 4.

and short"¹⁸⁴ and profoundly marked by fear¹⁸⁵ informs the philosophical underlayer of Allen's worldview. However, his quest for existential meaning is defined by his allegiance to Sartrean existentialism.¹⁸⁶ This does not single him out in the postmodernist literary culture – on the contrary. As Hoffmann explains, postmodernist writers "were born and grew up in the climate of existentialism."¹⁸⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre's work emphasizes the lack of purpose in human existence, the pointlessness of life, and insists on the importance of responsibility as a source of freedom and a guideline to finding meaning within the individual self. As Sartre writes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, "[m]an is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be [...] man is nothing other than what he makes for himself."¹⁸⁸ Sartre's existentialism was accused of undermining social conventions by emphasizing the importance of responsible individual choices, because by responsibility he meant responsibility to self, not to others, nor to social norms. Woody Allen's short fiction is underpinned by the principles of Sartrean existentialism, often explicitly articulated. Such is the case of "The

¹⁸⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 78.

¹⁸⁵ See the exploration of Hobbes's understanding of the mechanisms of fear and the implicit connection to existentialism in Jan H. Blits, "Hobbesian Fear." *Political Theory* 17.3 (Aug. 1989): 417-431.

¹⁸⁶ The connections between Hobbes's philosophy and existentialism have been insightfully discussed. See Fred R. Dallmayr. "Hobbes and Existentialism: Some Affinities." *The Journal of Politics* 31.3 (1969): 615-40; M. Macnamara and Z. Postma de Beer, "Hobbes and Existential Meaning. A Discussion between, INQ, an Inquirer, and X, a Political Philosopher." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 7.1 (1988): 9-17.

¹⁸⁷ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 202.

¹⁸⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale, 2007, 22.

Condemned", where Allen seems to sum up the essence of existentialism in only one mock-serious paragraph:

There is no God. There is no purpose to life. Nothing lasts. ... No wonder some people commit suicide! Why not end this absurdity? Why go through with this hollow charade called life? Why, except that somewhere within us a voice says, "Live." Always, from some inner region, we hear the command, "Keep living!" Cloquet recognized the voice; it was his insurance salesman.¹⁸⁹

Woody Allen's efforts towards building a coherent, unified consciousness represent an assiduous attempt to find relief for the anxiety caused by the certainty of death, an attempt that translates into a continuous quest for meaning. His fiction is a collective portrayal of a multifaceted consciousness, configured not as a response to the need for defining individual identity, but as a kaleidoscope of hypostases, which represent complementary strategies in his quest for a solution to overcome death anxiety and find relief from psychological squalor. These multiple configurations of the quest stress out the Sisyphean nature of the entire endeavor.

Gerhard Hoffmann's analysis of characters, self, and identity in postmodernist fiction provides useful conceptualizations for the further exploration of the construction of the self in Woody Allen's short fiction. Hofmann begins his investigation by distinguishing between characters as "essence" and characters as "function."¹⁹⁰ In his opinion, the character as essence is "a unique *substance*, an autonomous subject" that represents the "human psyche, the idiosyncrasies, desires, and needs of the self, its moral code, its

¹⁸⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 313.

¹⁹⁰ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 423.

identity with itself or its split and alienation."¹⁹¹ The view of the character as "function" is indebted to structuralism. It turns characters into

particle[s] in a network of historical beliefs, conventions, in a system of operations that sanctions only its own projections [...] an artificial construct, a conventional idea, [...] never a result but always a process directed by others, by organizations or forces.¹⁹²

Although the exploration of the essential self is the highlight of modernist fiction, Hoffmann argues that "the deconstruction of the self-centered character [...] is not only a postmodern affair."¹⁹³ On the other hand, although "[p]ostmodernism no longer highlights interiority and the psychological code", it still "does not abolish the idea of a full-fledged character."¹⁹⁴ Given that the tendency to dissolve the idea of a centered self is not exclusively assignable to postmodernism, what comes to distinguish postmodernist fiction is the lack of coherence and cohesion between self and the world, caused by the rejection of certainties, totalizations, and order. In Gerhard Hoffmann's words,

The distinguishing features of the character do not, as in modernism, evolve from isolated problems of identity and authenticity of the self. The psychic state of the self is determined by the lack of balance between self and world, by fundamental uncertainty. When the individual character plays a role, the encroaching world plays a counter-role. The world is again an important partner of the self, not only as giver of impulses and a medium of projections or as milieu and realm of causality and

¹⁹¹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 423.

¹⁹² Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 423.

¹⁹³ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 431.

¹⁹⁴ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 424.

order, but also as something that is ... the cause of ontological uncertainty.¹⁹⁵

Woody Allen's short fiction manifests all the symptoms presented above. His characters fall under the two major categories described by Hoffmann – simple, reduced function characters orbiting around an essential consciousness – and, as we could see in the subsection dedicated to Woody Allen's world construction techniques, no matter how hard he tries to reinvent the world, it always fails to make any sense. Reality and the outer world are always represented as absurd and illogical and are always projected through the perspective of a governing consciousness, easily recognizable throughout his entire fiction. This governing consciousness can be called the 'Allen self'. It represents the literary equivalent of what Sam Girgus and other film critics call the 'Allen character' or the 'Allen persona', a phrase which refers to the characters either played by Woody Allen, or those whom the public would have expected to be played by him. Obviously, there is a sense of coherence among all these characters, a common consciousness, and a common way of relating to the outer world, which make them easy to identify and categorize. According to Sam Girgus, "[t]his impulse toward coherence between Allen himself and his screen characters distinguishes Allen from other innovative directors."¹⁹⁶ The same type of coherence substantiates his short fiction as well. As Maurice Yacowar noted, although "in his writing Allen cannot exploit the consistent effect of his face and voice, one can sense his persona behind the prose."¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 434.

¹⁹⁶ Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen*, 11.

¹⁹⁷ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 74.

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The 'Allen character' is the hallmark of Woody Allen's films just as the 'Allen self' represents the distinguishing consciousness of his fiction. Maurice Yacowar emphasizes the similarities between Woody Allen's screen persona and the consciousness of his short fiction when he claims that, in his short stories, "Allen still projects the image of a short, paranoid loser, with sexual and intellectual pretensions, a man who exists on the fringe of an unsympathetic and absurd world, and who is both teased and satisfied by improbable dreams."¹⁹⁸ The 'Allen self' is a unified consciousness, a solidified subjectivity that manifests itself as the central presence of Woody Allen's entire short fiction and testifies to the deeply personal nature of his writing. He depends on the sincerity of his writing to create a bond with the readers, which he considers vital for the success of his writing. As Woody Allen confessed, "[w]hen the contact is intimate between the mind and the emotions of the reader, you can just drop snowflakes."¹⁹⁹

The 'Allen self' shares the neurotic behavior of the 'Allen character' and originates in the *schlemiel* figure, a Jewish stereotype that will be further developed in the chapter dedicated to the Jewish influences on Woody Allen's short fiction. Through this all-encompassing consciousness, Allen's short stories invite a reading that would assemble the different versions of a unique self. The 'Allen self' is always either the main character or the first-person narrator and represents what Hoffmann termed "the character as essence," "in which all ego versions originate and connect."²⁰⁰ It also continuously clashes with the fundamental uncertainty and the absurdity of the world. The 'Allen self' does not attempt to

¹⁹⁸ Yacowar, *Loser Takes All*, 74.

¹⁹⁹ Allen quoted in Lahr, *Show and Tell*, 10.

²⁰⁰ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 444.

define its identity, but to make sense of a biologically determined and limited existence. From this perspective, each of his texts can be construed as a quest in a specific direction, be it love, religion, art, philosophy, science, or just the simple, cruel, and absurd immediate reality. Needless to say that the search becomes a vicious cycle and all attempts are doomed to failure because of the very premises of the quest.

The quest is represented by the 'Allen self' assuming different roles. He can be a detective in search of God ("Mr. Big"), a writer giving up high artistic aspirations for financial reasons ("This Nib for Hire" or "Glory Hallelujah, Sold!"), or just an average man, facing despair and overcome by a sense of futility ("No Kaddish for Weinstein" or "The Shallowest Man"). Whichever hypostasis he might assume, he will always be haunted by the same anxieties and concerns.

Often, the author attempts to create the illusion of identity between himself and the first-person narrator, either through his strongly confessional tone or through direct reference to himself. Introducing the author's name in the title of "Selections from the Allen Notebook", for instance, recalls the strategies of creating "an illusion of authenticity" and "autobiographical revelation" that are definitive in stand-up routines.²⁰¹ The abstract preceding the text begins by reinforcing the autobiographical illusion but ends by destroying the reader's confidence in the reliability of the narrator through the use of pleonastic excessive redundancy that reveals the metafictional contradiction regarding the circumstances surrounding the publication of the text. Woody Allen writes:

²⁰¹ Miriam Chirico, "Performed Authenticity: Narrating the Self in the Comic Monologues of David Sedaris, John Leguizamo, and Spalding Gray." *Studies in American Humor* 2.1 (2016): 22–46, 23.

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*"Following are excerpts from the hitherto secret private journal of Woody Allen, which will be published posthumously or after his death, whichever comes first."*²⁰² The text takes the form of a narrative of intimate thoughts, parodying writers' confessional diaries. The choice of form reunites stand-up comedy conventions and the preference for monologues displayed by the Jewish narrative tradition. It also allows the story to vacillate between reinforcing and destroying the illusion of authenticity. The admission of one's own misdeeds, explicit acknowledgment of personal imperfection, and revelation of inner torment, emotional instability, and psychological weakness together intensify the illusion of the confession's sincerity and authenticity, but this illusion is immediately and abruptly disrupted by Allen's ebullient, hyperbolic imagination, which casts each confessional fragment into the realm of the surreal and the grotesque.

"Selections" exemplifies the kind of introspective self-absorption that best articulates the disquietude and the musings of the 'Allen self'. It tackles a series of concerns, ranging from family issues and romantic relationships to irresolvable metaphysical contradictions and struggles with the existential threat of emptiness and nothingness by means of self-deprecatory detachment. As is the case with most of Woody Allen's texts, the quest for meaning as a governing principle is treated here as a joke and a dilemma at the same time.

"The Early Essays" is somewhat more cohesive than "Selections from the Allen Notebook". The text has a similar structure, beginning with a make-believe abstract that introduces Woody Allen in a self-ironical manner, as the very source of the cogitations presented there. The abstract toys with intertextuality

²⁰² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 7.

by gesturing towards Francis Bacon's aphoristic style, and ends by displaying Allen's incurable pessimism in a comic-ironic manner:

Following are a few of the early essays of Woody Allen. There are no late essays, because he ran out of observations. Perhaps as Allen grows older he will understand more of life and will set it down, and then retire to his bedroom and remain there indefinitely. Like the essays of Bacon, Allen's are brief and full of practical wisdom, although space does not permit the inclusion of his most profound statement, "Looking at the Bright Side."²⁰³

"The Early Essays" articulates the same general concerns of the 'Allen self'. In his specific humorous-absurd manner, he ponders on being an elm, on materialism, beauty, romantic love, and, of course, mortality and meaning. The ideas developed here begin as a solemn discourse, but they are soon twisted and end in absurdity or triviality:

The chief problem about death, incidentally, is the fear that there may be no afterlife – a depressing thought, particularly for those who have bothered to shave. Also, there is the fear that there is an afterlife but no one will know where it's being held. On the plus side, death is one of the few things that can be done as easily lying down.²⁰⁴ (62)

The 'Allen self' exists through the sheer anxiety caused by the certainty of death, which becomes the drive for the ceaseless quest for meaning. The quest is not structured as an evolutionary process, but rather as a trial-and-error experiment. The 'Allen self' does not evolve emotionally, although he does probe the depth of human affect by continuously rearranging the semantics of emotions, belief, perception, and cognition. Reason becomes the

²⁰³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 61.

²⁰⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 62.

vehicle for checking the sensory experience and deconstructing the cultural conceptualization of emotions and sentimentality.

Woody Allen's approach to feelings and emotions can be easily explained both by the editorial requests of *The New Yorker* and by the more general trend in postmodern literature. *The New Yorker* always encouraged the type of fiction which features rational and distant representations of human experience. On the other hand, this strategy of coping with an absurd world, which can only provide the context for equally absurd experiences, through the over-reduction of emotions aligns Woody Allen's fiction to Baudrillard's and Jameson's perspectives on postmodern society. Within this context, Woody Allen's short fiction is a reaction to the disappearance of the real and the authentic, and their replacement with "a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense."²⁰⁵ According to Fredric Jameson, contemporary society experiences "a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling."²⁰⁶ Jameson further explains his statement by claiming that "[t]his is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings – which it may be better and more accurate to call 'intensities' – are now free-floating and impersonal."²⁰⁷

In investigating postmodernist writers' reticence towards embracing the exploration of human interiority, Hans Bertens detects a "strange cultural chiasmus" between the modernist and the postmodernist attitude regarding emotions in art and culture at large:

²⁰⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8.

²⁰⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 12.

²⁰⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 12.

Whereas modernist fiction arguably allowed a wider range of emotions and more emotional intensity than the public culture of its time, postmodern fiction is astonishingly reticent in its display of emotions compared to contemporary public culture. Indeed, with regard to the display of emotions our public culture has developed a tolerance that thirty-five years ago seemed impossible. So why hasn't postmodern literature followed suit?²⁰⁸

Following Jameson's theory on the postmodern, Bertens interprets the postmodernist writers' tendency to replace the depth of human affect with a large array of disconnected 'intensities' as an elitist reaction against the contemporary bias towards the public display of emotions. He explains his argument by attributing a sense of social responsibility to postmodernist writers. Hans Bertens writes:

The only thing the even reasonably honest writer of fiction can therefore do is to exaggerate postmodernity's unreality, to offer a caricature of the unreal in the hope of rudely waking his or her honest or, as the case may be, less penetrating fellow citizens and confronting them with things as they are. Everything else plays into the hands of the enemy, just as for Baudrillard every form of resistance against the reign of simulation is itself a simulation and only strengthens simulation's stranglehold on the real.²⁰⁹

The public display of emotions in contemporary society, facilitated by television shows, mass psychic rejuvenation programs, or anonymous meetings, seems to have dissipated their deep, personal nature. One of the negative side effects of the unrestrained display of emotions consists of building "a

²⁰⁸ Hans Bertens, "Why Molly Doesn't: Humanism's Long, Long Shadow." *Emotions in Postmodernism*. Eds. Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997. 25-39.

²⁰⁹ Bertens, "Why Molly Doesn't", 35.

commodity like conception of the self.”²¹⁰ Human emotions are explored by postmodernist fiction from a rational standpoint and they all seem to fail the proof of authenticity. Within this context, emotions are reduced to their basic structure and exposed for mere biological drives, which leaves room for theorizing postmodernism as governed by the logic of desire. As Scott Lash argues, postmodern art “draws on desire and operates from a position of sensation.”²¹¹ Woody Allen's short fiction subscribes to this vision of depthlessness and lost authenticity of human emotions through his use of comic mode, irony, parody, and other distancing techniques. In the existential quest for meaning, Woody Allen reconfigures human experience under the reign of desire as the ultimate drive, an important aspect of his short fiction which shall be explored in the subsequent subchapter, dedicated to the configuration of the romantic paradigm in Woody Allen's fiction.

Existential concerns, the distrustful attitude towards the grand narratives of cognition and feeling, coupled with a specific way of demystifying and trivializing them, become the hallmark of the ‘Allen self’ and make all the main characters in his short stories cohere into an easily recognizable consciousness. In this grand Allenesque scheme of existential quest, all other minor characters represent “functions”. I insisted above on Gerhard Hoffmann's dichotomic taxonomy of characters because my contention is that such an approach facilitates the understanding of Allen's construction of the self and use of characters. His short stories are built around the ‘character as essence’ – ‘character as

²¹⁰ Nicholson, Linda. “Emotion in Postmodern Public Spaces.” *Emotions in Postmodernism*. Eds. Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997. 1-24, 13.

²¹¹ Quoted in Bertens, “Why Molly Doesn't”, 31.

function' complementarity. The 'Allen self' needs 'actants'²¹² in order to perform his quest or make a statement. These minor characters are either stereotypes, easily recognizable human typologies, or what Umberto Eco refers to as 'transworld identities'²¹³, that is, characters that belong to a different ontological realm. Woody Allen only briefly sketches them and leaves room for the readers to bring in their own personal extratextual knowledge and references. Thus we have the sophisticated (pseudo)-intellectual ("The Whore of Mensa"), the fashion high-hat ("Sam, You Made the Pants Too Fragrant"), the snob ("The Rejection" or "Nanny Dearest"), the femme fatale ("Mr. Big" or "How Deadly Your Taste Buds, My Sweet"), the rabbi, the Jewish mother (projected as psychological terror rather than physical appearance), the shrewish wife and her more appealing counterpart, the fabulous *shiksa*, and several other typologies pertaining to the Jewish-American urban experience. The other category of borrowed identities, featuring both fictional characters (Madame Bovary in "The Kugelmass Episode") and real-life personalities, mostly artists, writers, and philosophers, challenges the readers to exercise their erudition. Whatever their origin, these minor characters are used as opportunities to explore and check the situational validity of the emotions, thoughts, and desires of the 'Allen self'.

Although Woody Allen's fiction deploys and exploits most postmodernist literary strategies, he does not abandon the idea of a centered, unified, self-reflexive consciousness. His short fiction brings in the idea of centeredness and authenticity, underpinned

²¹² Defined by Hoffmann as "reduced and abstract characters, skeletted subjects", *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 440.

²¹³ Eco, *Lector in fabula*.

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by a sense of responsibility to the self. Both Woody Allen's films and his short fiction have this easily recognizable signature, a specific mark tributary to the central consciousness around which his entire work gravitates. This comes to challenge Fredric Jameson's theory on the "death of the subject" translated as the dissipation of the "conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style."²¹⁴ In other words, Woody Allen has built a consciousness that holds a fragmented world together by binding it with strings of existentialist philosophy and elements pertaining to the author's ethnic legacy. Moreover, this underlying structure becomes a mark of authenticity in a postmodern context said to have lost any such values.

2.2.4. *Love in the time of the postmodern*

Romantic affairs are at the center of Woody Allen's films and the Allen persona is often seen struggling to understand relationships, looking for a soul mate, or exploring desire and sexuality. Nevertheless, something always happens to hinder one relationship after another. A similar pattern also emerges in Woody Allen's short stories from the interaction between the 'Allen self' and the female characters, between the *schlemiel* and the *shiksa* or the Jewish wife; this pattern defines the romantic paradigm of Woody Allen's short fiction. The romantic paradigm in Woody Allen's short fiction can be defined in dichotomies. On the one hand, there is the passion for a beautiful woman who is, most often, easily identifiable as Gentile, and, on the other hand,

²¹⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 4.

there is the tiresome marriage relationship to a woman drawing on the stereotype of the nagging Jewish wife.

It is not uncommon for a Jewish-American writer to attempt the escape from ethnic identification and determination by fleeing from the arms of the Jewish mother into the arms of a *shiksa*. In the case of Woody Allen, the attraction to the *shiksa* is not only an attempt to undermine the precepts of normative Judaism and transgress the Jewish cultural background. Although the exoticism of difference seems appealing to a writer belonging to a hyphenated culture, the romantic relationship with the *shiksa* is explored just to prove the illusion and the inconsistency of everlasting love. Although ethnicity is of considerable importance for the way in which Woody Allen shapes fictional worlds and characters, the significance of the failed relationship between the *schlemiel* and the *shiksa* or his confinement to an unhappy marriage goes beyond the boundaries of ethnic interpretation. Marriage is, of course, one of the favorite themes of gags and humorous prose and although Woody Allen's comical depiction of wives and the mocking attitude towards marriage can be attributed to the rich Jewish tradition, my contention is that there is more to this attitude than contextual and ethnic justifications. He uses his Jewish heritage more as a pretext than as a theme in itself.

In Woody Allen's work, the quest for love starts as an existential quest for meaning. In his apprehension of this notion, love equals passionate love, the only kind of love that can offer individuals the relief they need in an otherwise empty existence. However, the only certainty about passionate love is that it does not last more than the effect of Tristan and Isolde's love potion, but despite this deficiency, it seems to be one of the few remedies that can momentarily attenuate existential anxiety and despair. The human desire for unity, feeding on the mythology of soul mates

and the story of Plato's Androgyne, is deconstructed and transfigured by empirical proof. The revelation of the barrenness of the myth of the everlasting love is tragically expressed in "The Lunatic's Tale" where Woody Allen writes: "[d]id anyone I know have a 'meaningful relationship'? My parents stayed together forty years, but that was out of spite."²¹⁵ A similar remark is replicated in "Retribution" when the narrator discusses his parents' marriage: "my own folks, who had been married inexplicably for forty years (out of spite it seemed)."²¹⁶

In Woody Allen's short fiction marriage represents romance in its most advanced state of degradation. The high frequency of jokes about marriage might be indebted to the tradition of stand-up comedy routines, where they are commonplace. The wives appear domineering, controlling, nagging, and manipulative, no longer sexually nor intellectually appealing to their husbands. After marriage, stimulation is replaced by inhibition, passion is replaced by abhorrence, and lust is always directed to another woman. In "Calisthenics, Poison Ivy, Final Cut", Mr. Varnishke, allegedly trying to defend his wife, describes her as follows: "Speaking, by the way, of Elise, there never was a finer woman despite some smoker-car witticism you passed when you came to visit, highlighting her varicose veins, which drew no laughs even from the busboys, who hate her like rat poison."²¹⁷ The narrator in "Strung Out" introduces his wife as follows:

My wife is more waves than particles, too, it's just that her waves have begun to sag a little. Or maybe the problem is that my wife has too many quarks. The truth is, lately she looks as if she had passed too close to the event horizon of a black hole and some of

²¹⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 381.

²¹⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 454.

²¹⁷ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 47.

her – not all of her by any means – was sucked in. It gives her a funny shape, which I'm hoping will be correctable by cold fusion.²¹⁸

While these comments on wives and marriage do read like stand-up comedy jokes, the context of Allen's short fiction invites additional consideration. Even though both male and female characters in Woody Allen's fiction lack the tragic dimension which builds monumental love stories, the tragedy of his romantic paradigm lies in the emptiness of the concept of love itself. When it takes the form of a serious relationship, the interaction between the male protagonist and the female counterpart is governed and destroyed by his psychological instability and internal chaos. Therefore, for Woody Allen's characters, the continuous search for meaning in love ends in disappointment, as if in an attempt to consolidate Denis de Rougemont's theory on love as a cultural artifact, deceptive in its magnified importance to the Western world.

In *Love and the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont traces the myth of everlasting romantic love down to the love poetry of the troubadours in medieval Provence, to 'cortezia', the passionate courtly love. Beginning with the analysis of the legend of Tristan and Isolde and its representations over centuries, Denis de Rougemont emphasizes the conflictual perception of passionate love and marriage in the Western world. De Rougemont points out the inconsistency of the idealized devotion that the knight manifests towards his lady and exposes romantic relationships as psychologically misbalanced, built on forbidden, often adulterous relationships, and closely linked to what Sigmund Freud calls 'the death instinct'. For Denis de Rougemont, that which manifests as

²¹⁸ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 129.

passionate love directed towards a subject is actually a state of 'being in love with being in love'.²¹⁹

The awareness that ideal love is an empty construct bereft of meaning is at the core of Woody Allen's romantic paradigm; it contributes to increasing the existential anxieties of a self desperately trying to find reference points in an otherwise nonsensical and hostile world. Love turns out to be but a fecund illusion, which offers provisory solutions and helps deal with the mercilessness of biological determinism. When this illusion dissipates, it leaves behind an even harsher reality and an even weaker psyche to deal with it. This disenchanting attitude towards the myth of romantic love is clearly articulated by the author himself when he claims that:

In relation to impossibility of authentic romantic commitment – this is a question of pure luck, the interfacing of two enormous complexities and the delusion that it can be “worked at” is just that. Efforts by the parties may aid in a small way but have the same relation to the success of a relationship that a writing class has to a real reader.²²⁰

Although Woody Allen's conception of the myth of everlasting love intersects with De Rougemont's theory, he does not follow in the direction suggested by De Rougemont, toward the spiritual love of God; he does not turn Eros into Agape, nor does he build another monolithic truth to replace the one that had proven deceiving. With Allen, love refers exclusively to romantic relationships. This point is made clear in “The Early Essays” where

²¹⁹ Denis de Rougemont. *Iubirea și Occidentul*. Trans. Ioana Căndea-Marinescu. București: Editura Univers, 1987.

²²⁰ Allen quoted in Sander H. Lee *Woody Allen's Angst. Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997, 375.

he writes: "By love, of course, I refer to romantic love – the love between man and woman, rather than between mother and child, or a boy and his dog, or two headwaiters."²²¹ Love is clearly and amusingly differentiated from other feelings, such as admiration: "To be loved, certainly, is different from being admired, as one can be admired from afar but to really love someone it is essential to be in the same room with the person, crouching behind the drapes."²²²

The influences on the configuration of the romantic paradigm in Woody Allen's short fiction can also be traced back to the spirit of Sartrean philosophy. In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre²²³ explains that romantic relationships bear an intrinsic ontological incompatibility explained through a mechanism of dominance and possession that transforms the achievement of unity into a strategy of erasure of the other's consciousness. Woody Allen's perspective also supports the idea of the impossibility of romantic love. Still, he does not define romantic relationships as a threat to individual freedom, but rather as a disappointing cultural artifact that fails to provide meaning. Confronted with the bitter awareness of the empty promise underlying the myth of everlasting love, Woody Allen builds his own philosophy according to which the pursuit of happiness is no longer a quest for transcendent meaning, but the filching of every little moment of joy one can get. He thus reconfigures his romantic paradigm, which is no longer to be rooted in the myth of everlasting love, but in desire. Desire becomes the governing drive

²²¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 63.

²²² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 63.

²²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1971, 361-379.

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in the quest for meaning and therefore the search is no longer directed towards another subject, towards the outside world, but rather towards the inner self. Within this configuration, the need for unity no longer involves another person, but the reconciliation between the individual self and their desires.

Romantic relationships are doomed to failure and the cause of this failure is, most often, a combination of obsession, neurosis, uncontrollable lust, and boredom. In "Retribution" Woody Allen creates an intricate narrative that explores questions of love, lust, sexuality, the challenges of monogamy, and morality. In this short story, Harold Cohen, "scrawny, long-nosed, twenty-four-year-old, budding dramatist and whiner,"²²⁴ falls for Connie Chasen, a "[t]all, blond, high cheekboned, an actress, a scholar, a charmer, irrevocably alienated, with a hostile and perceptive wit only challenged in its power to attract by the lewd, humid eroticism her every curve suggested."²²⁵ Their passion reaches unearthly levels and the relationship seems to be headed in the right direction until Harold meets Connie's family and develops an unbelievably powerful crush on her mother. Although Harold pursues this newly developed passion in a platonic manner and desperately fights his urges, the passion between him and Connie starts to slowly fade away because she begins to remind him of his Aunt Rifka, while he starts to remind her of her brother. These incestuous associations make Connie leave Harold, and Harold ends up marrying Connie's mother, Emily. This marriage outrages Harold's mother, who could not bear the thought of her Jewish son's marrying a *shiksa*, and an old one, for that matter, but it also refreshes Connie's sexual attraction to Harold.

²²⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 449.

²²⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 449.

The story ironically blames the Ancient Greeks and their mythology for the failure of the relationship, simply because they provided the raw material for the modern Oedipus/Electra complex. No wonder that, while attempting to make sense of the situation, Harold's thoughts were directed to those people who explored these myths and transformed them into pathologies: "I knew only as I drove through the cold, night, autumn air that somewhere Freud, Sophocles, and Eugene O'Neill were laughing."²²⁶ Harold and Connie were first brought together by their insecurities and neuroses. Disguised as boredom, incestuous feelings, and the impossibility to resist new temptations, these insecurities and neuroses break them apart and get them together again in a newly-configured incestuous relationship. Emily is not much different either, and she actually closes the vicious circle since, at a certain point, Connie tells Harold that her mother thinks of him as a son.

Although written as a humorous piece, the tone in "Retribution" is more serious, more preoccupied, and, at times, more bitter than comic. Torn apart by guilt and mixed feelings, by unanswerable questions about the other's feelings, Harold's tone loses witticism and becomes more emotional:

We did also look in each other's eyes and waxed poetic about life while knocking back tall, foamy, white beverages that held minuscule wooden parasols lanced into floating pineapple squares – but there it ended. And it did so because, despite the unblocking of my baser urges, I felt that it would completely destroy Connie. In the end it was my own guilty conscience – or, more accurately, my return to sanity – that prevented me from placing the predictable hand on Emily Chasen's leg and pursuing my dark desires. That sudden realization that I was only a mad fantasizer who, in fact, loved Connie and must never risk hurting her in any way did me in. Yes, Harold Cohen was a more conventional type

²²⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 445.

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than he would have us believe. And more in love with his girl friend than he cared to admit.²²⁷

Nevertheless, both his abstention from temptation and his revelation about the feelings he has for Connie are annihilated by Connie's loss of interest in their relationship, and thus the Greek curse is allowed to surface. Although by the end of the story Harold gets both Connie and Emily, what they have is not the genuine love he was looking for, but a twisted, retributive relationship, which exasperates Harold to the point where he contemplates embracing a rabbinical career.

"Retribution" is connected to "The Lunatic's Tale" by more than the remark mentioned above, about the parents staying together out of spite. They both bring up an Aunt Rifka, who has an inhibitory effect on the male character. Besides these immediate textual intersections, the two texts are variations on the same theme and explorations of similar romantic relationship patterns which follow different scenarios. Moreover, they both explore psychological disorders explained through Greek mythology. Unfortunately, regardless of the development of the plot, both stories lead to the same conclusion: everlasting, meaningful love is but a deceiving empty notion.

"The Lunatic's Tale" tells the story of a homeless man, Ossip Parkis, who used to be a successful doctor, but whose long series of romantic failures have brought him on the verge of insanity. His marital record is fairly impressive:

My first wife was brilliant, but had no sense of humor. Of the Marx Brothers, she was convinced the amusing one was Zeppo. My second wife was beautiful, but lacked real passion. I recall once, while we were making love, a curious optical illusion occurred and

²²⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 458.

for a split second it almost looked as though she was moving. Sharon Pflug, whom I lived with for three months, was too hostile. Whitney Weisglass was too accommodating. Pippa Mondale, a cheerful divorcee, made the fatal mistake of defending candles shaped like Laurel and Hardy.²²⁸

His luck seems to change when he meets Olive Chomsky, "a handsome woman," "a culture vulture," "literate and wry, who quoted Eliot and played tennis and also Bach's *Two Part Inventions* on the piano."²²⁹ Everything appears to be going well in the relationship until "the light hit Olive at a certain angle [and] she inexplicably resembled my mother's Aunt Rifka."²³⁰ This is the perfect excuse for Ossip Parkis to start cheating on her with Tiffany, a fabulous *shiksa*, with a face and body that "only come[s] along every few million years and usually heralds an ice age or the destruction of the world by fire."²³¹ Tiffany fails to offer Ossip Parkis the intellectual challenge he needs, and the logical solution seems to be a surgical intervention for switching the bodies and the brains of the two women, thus constructing the perfect mix of eroticism and intellectualism. Even so, the relationship is not meant to last because of Ossip's neurosis and his inability to resist temptation: "I inexplicably grew unsatisfied with this dream woman and developed instead a crush on Billie Jean Zapruder, an airline stewardess whose boyish, flat figure and Alabama twang caused my heart to do flip-flops."²³² If the Oedipus complex informs the reaction of Ossip Parkis when he associates Olive with Aunt Rifka, the story as a whole draws on the mythical Pygmalion-

²²⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 381.

²²⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 382.

²³⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 380.

²³¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 380.

²³² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 385.

Galatea relationship. Doctor Parkis created the perfect woman in his attempt to overcome what he called "[t]his maddening predicament that afflicts perhaps a good many of my contemporaries. Never to find all the requirements one needs in a single member of the opposite sex."²³³ Therefore, it is not dissatisfaction with the sinful nature of women, but the awareness of a general dysfunction of contemporary society that drives Parkis to assume a god-like position. The vicious circle rooted in this dysfunction renders Parkis' Galatea unable to withstand the proof of a 'happily ever after' scenario.

Allen's transfiguration of the Pygmalion myth exposes the radical rupture between contemporary society and mythical thought and comments on the postmodern alteration of desire in relation to commodification and consumerism. It also brings into discussion the role of desire in the quest for meaning and the pathological intensification of desire that goes beyond libidinal investment and can never be gratified.

Desire as a means of exploring and understanding the true nature of the self represents a point of intersection with Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality in Western society. According to the Foucauldian perspective, the evolution of individuals towards knowledge presupposes the reconciliation with their own desires and the acceptance of their true nature, as revealed by inner drives. In the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* Foucault writes:

individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a

²³³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 384.

certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen.²³⁴

Desire, in its transgressive²³⁵ nature, informs strategies of practicing freedom, allowing experiments in the refashioning of the self. In "The Lunatic's Tale", transgression in the form of yielding to temptation becomes the norm, and its continuous exercise becomes a form of captivity. The excessive indulgence exposes a radical self-compassion need, most likely inflamed by the confrontation with the voidness of reality. Terry Eagleton remarks, via the Freudian understanding of desire as constitutive to self, that "[o]ur drives and desires may form a pattern of which we are unconscious, yet which fundamentally determines the meaning of our existence."²³⁶ From this angle, "The Lunatic's Tale" exposes the endogenous breakdown of the meaning-making apparatus.

Through the utter skepticism toward the myth of love and the emphasis on desire, Woody Allen's short fiction contributes to the deconstructive tendencies of postmodernism. The romantic paradigm in Woody Allen's short fiction is configured as the deconstruction of the Western romantic paradigm built on the redemptory power of everlasting romantic love. Woody Allen's rethinking of romantic love as mere desire and sexual drive is consistent with the postmodern distrust of grand narratives as explored and exemplified by the entire body of postmodern cultural products. The myth of redemptive love has dominated

²³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. The Use of Pleasure*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. II. New York: Vintage Books, 1990, 6.

²³⁵ As explained by Foucault. See above.

²³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 66.

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Western imaginary for centuries, but it can no longer hold in a world in which real affect is on the wane and is being replaced by what Fredric Jameson calls "intensities"²³⁷.

The emphasis on desire as a principle of inexhaustible energy informs postmodernism's Freudian libidinal economy. As Scott Lash notes, postmodernism is "inextricably bound up with desire" and postmodern art mirrors "the supersession by the unconsciousness and the bodily of the hegemony of the symbolic."²³⁸ Elaborating on Lash's theory in *The Idea of the Postmodern*, Hans Bertens claims that two major camps can be distinguished in the French theory of the second half of the twentieth century: "[a] Saussurean one that emphasizes language and structure (the early Barthes, Lacan, Derrida) and a Nietzschean one that emphasizes power and desire (Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari)."²³⁹ He continues by stating that "[t]he general drift in the late 1960s and early 1970s was from the linguistic position to a position highlighted by power and desire."²⁴⁰

Of course, desire "designates no single idea or model of human behavior,"²⁴¹ and postmodernist writers explore the subtle structures of desire in various ways, beginning with desire as a creative drive and emphasizing its inherently insatiable character. As Gerhard Hoffmann noted, "any number of postmodern writers, for instance Barthelme, Elkin, Gaddis, Gass, or Suckenic, demonstrate that the desire for change, for metamorphosis, but

²³⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 11. See the discussion in the previous section.

²³⁸ Lash quoted in Bertens, "Why Molly Doesn't," 29.

²³⁹ Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*. London: Routledge, 1995, 134.

²⁴⁰ Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 134.

²⁴¹ Jay Clayton. *The Pleasures of Babel. Contemporary American Literature and Theory*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 63.

also for satisfaction is a fundamental given of the character's psyche."²⁴² Within this context, it is not the emphasis on desire which distinguishes Woody Allen's writing, but the manner in which he performs the reconfiguration of desire through existentialist lenses. He associates desire with Eros and the life instinct and uses it as a drive for finding relief from the anxiety of death and for stimulating the quest for meaning within the self.

The notions of *meaning within the individual self* and *happiness through the fulfillment of immediate desire*, which underpin Woody Allen's romantic paradigm, are well articulated in the final monologue of *Whatever Works*, when Boris Yelnikoff, the main character in the film, turns to the camera and tells the audience:

I happen to hate New Year's celebrations. Everybody desperate to have fun. Trying to celebrate in some pathetic little way. Celebrate what? A step closer to the grave? That's why I can't say enough times, whatever love you can get and give, whatever happiness you can filch or provide, every temporary measure of grace, whatever works. And don't kid yourself. Because it's by no means up to your own human ingenuity.²⁴³

The exploration of romantic love follows a fairly interesting and coherent trajectory both in Woody Allen's films and in his short fiction. It is rooted in the larger context of the existentialist quest for meaning in an absurd, potentially godless world. The search for everlasting love as a guideline in one's existence, followed by a long series of losses, failures, and disappointments which led to the reconfiguration of the romantic paradigm and the quest for meaning is better articulated in his films. However, the very same idea uttered in the final monologues of *Whatever Works*

²⁴² Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 475.

²⁴³ *Whatever Works*. By Woody Allen. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Larry David. 2009. Film.

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or *Annie Hall* echoes throughout Woody Allen's entire fiction and can be easily traced in his short stories. The short stories published in his earlier volumes, later collected in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, explore passionate love as a potential relief from existential angst. The exploration is always announced by the presence of female characters that are both attractive and intellectually stimulating, the *shiksas*, the *femmes fatales*. However, since love has lost its redemptory power in the contemporary world, every such attempt is doomed to failure, thus intensifying the sense of emptiness. This idea is the fundament of every text concerned with romantic relationships and is probably best illustrated in "The Lunatic's Tale", "No Kaddish for Weinstein", "Retribution", or "The Shallowest Man". The latter extends the exploration of romantic relationships towards the same notion that drives the final monologue of *Whatever Works*, encouraging the filching of every little joy life can offer. In "The Shallowest Man", Mr. Lenny Medel uses the pretext of visiting his dying friend in order to seduce a very attractive nurse. The relationship does not last but that has never been the point. What matters is that Lenny Mendel should add one more year of happiness to his life. A similar attitude accompanies the husband characters in all of Woody Allen's short stories. Desire overcomes morality within the context of the existential struggle and, therefore, there is absolutely nothing wrong with using a dying friend or cheating on a wife if these actions can provide a moment of happiness. If earlier short stories are configured as failed attempts to find relief in love, the more recent texts, collected in *Mere Anarchy*, abandon all romantic ideals and focus on a more hedonistic approach to life, thus reinforcing Woody Allen's philosophy of desire.

Considered separately, Woody Allen's short stories can pass for simple humoristic texts, populated by attractive and

mysterious feminine presences or mocking the institution of marriage and the image of the nagging wife. Nonetheless, from an integrative perspective, Woody Allen's short fiction is configured as a series of explorations converging towards the demonstration of his theory on love, desire, and the emptiness of human existence. In this manner, Woody Allen's view on romantic relationships gains far more coherence and opens the way to integrating them into the wider context of postmodernist-existentialist philosophy with Jewish touches, which constitutes the hallmark of his entire work.

2.2.5. Stories told in the postmodern language

Woody Allen's short fiction resists the temptations of traditional narrative and conventional plot either by tackling extraordinary events placed in a distorted fictional reality or by completely dissolving them into disconnected fragments. His texts cover a large array of experiences pertaining to the sophisticated metropolitan American life, presented in an unusual, sometimes disturbing manner, which testifies to Woody Allen's active experimentation with style, narrative, and literary genres and to his continuous oscillation between postmodernist playful fabulation and realism.

In most cases, Woody Allen uses the plot as a pretext to articulate his existentialist concerns and his view of reality and existence. The anxiety caused by the certainty of death is a major, recurrent theme in Woody Allen's short stories and it becomes the drive behind his relentless search for meaning. The attempts to find a meaning for existence and a relief for the anxiety stemming from the awareness of mortality follow three main directions: the search for God, the exploration for romantic love, and the seizing

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of every little moment of joy one can filch. The quest, as presented in his short stories, explores both extraordinary, supernatural events, as well as insignificant moments in the individual's life. In some cases, the plot completely dissipates and makes room for mock-philosophical musings.

Woody Allen's texts acquired the ability to shape-shift from the postmodernist writers' appetite for experimenting with various literary conventions. The author uses preformed structures and materials, previous forms and formulae to tell his stories which end up adopting a heteroglotic mode of discourse. In the spirit of the consecrated postmodernist tradition previous artistic modes of representation are recycled by the use of pastiche, defined by Fredric Jameson as follows:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor [...].²⁴⁴

Driven by the energy of play, Woody Allen's texts engage in a frolicsome manipulation of stylistic or genre-specific conventions and work towards a sometimes grossly bizarre, implausible, surrealist composition. Short stories beginning with what appears to be an easily discernable, linear plot, challenge the reader by means of an absurd or fantastic twist and then build up an excessive narrative which aligns with postmodernist fiction's

²⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 4.

propensity for strategies of excess, to its "pendant for maximalism in every form."²⁴⁵

The narrative design of Woody Allen's short stories is informed by the existentialist ideology which binds together his entire work. Each of his texts targets a specific ending, which would either stress out the lack of meaning in a hostile and potentially godless world, or critique society in its absurd clichéd manifestations. For instance, in "My Philosophy," what begins as an account of a normal day in a man's life, continues as a pastiche of traditional philosophical discourses, shifting the perspective from a realistic representation of the world, toward a mock-philosophical attempt to unveil the essence of that world. The cogitations presented here are divided into three main sections: "The Critique of Pure Dread", "Eschatological Dialectics as a Means of Coping with Shingles" and "The Cosmos on Five Dollars a Day", and end with two absurd parables and a series of nonsensical aphorisms that sum up Woody Allen's existentialist concerns masked as philosophical frivolity. The last of the aphorisms is one of Woody Allen's most famous quotes, "Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends,"²⁴⁶ by which he trivializes any attempt to find meaning in a completely absurd world.

"Yes, But Can the Steam Engine Do This?" follows a similar structural pattern: it begins as a confessional story and ends in a completely different style. The narrator, waiting for Joseph K, his beagle, to finish its therapy session, becomes fascinated by John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, and decides to write his biography. The result is a parodical reinvention of the Earl's

²⁴⁵ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 637.

²⁴⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 173.

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personal history which presents, in a mock-serious manner, the Sisyphean effort that the Earl has put into developing the perfect recipe for sandwiches.

As shown in the previous subsections, Woody Allen appeals to various literary conventions to tell his story. "The Schmeed Memoirs" is written as a reaction to the memoirist literature of the Third Reich, "The UFO Menace" or "A Look at Organized Crime" mock the documentary form, "Spring Bulletin" is a comical representation of the academic curricula, while "Hassidic Tales with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar" employs the vernacular of Hasidic storytelling. While in most cases Woody Allen's texts reprocess older literary conventions and styles just as "speech in a dead language,"²⁴⁷ without any specific critical insight, when it comes to postmodernist literary techniques or mass audience entertainment genres, he tends to be more critical, more prone to parody.

One of the favorite popular genres of Woody Allen's parody is hardboiled fiction. His choice can be viewed as a reaction to the increasing popularity of the genre, beginning in the Thirties. Woody Allen embraces the detective story style only to expose its clichéd conventions through the use of extraordinary events and exaggerated narrative development. Probably the best example in this respect is "Mr. Big", the text which tells the story of detective Kaiser Lupowitz, hired to find God. "Mr. Big" is a parody of *The Maltese Falcon*, a film which is considered by several critics as the first major film noir. The private investigator from *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade, has to deal with a woman with changeable identity, who begins as Miss Wonderly, then assumes another fake identity, becoming Miss LeBlanc, but, in the end, her real identity

²⁴⁷ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 4.

is revealed as Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Following a similar pattern, Kaiser Lupowitz is hired by Heather Butkiss, a "nudie model," who later admits to another assumed identity, Claire Rosenweig, a student majoring in philosophy at Vassar, but who turns out to be Ellen Shepherd, professor of physics at Bryn Mawr. The basic detective story scheme is parodied in Woody Allen's short story through the use of an exaggerated plot followed by a rapid succession of investigative steps and an amazingly simplistic conclusion of the investigation: God is dead and the murderer is the very person who had hired the detective in the first place.

As Jay Parini notes, "'Mr. Big' captures the zero-affect delivery of detective fiction,"²⁴⁸ but Woody Allen also uses the detective story formula for more profound philosophical exploration purposes. The search for God is shaped as a series of dialogues including the atheistic, the rabbinic, and the catholic perspective, and continues as philosophical meditation. Moreover, the changing identities of the femme fatale who hired detective Lupowitz are symbolic of the hero's quest. At first, she is the object of lust, but Lupowitz is far from finding God through sexual desire. When she assumes philosophical preoccupations, Lupowitz seems to get closer, but there is still no hard evidence for the existence of God. Nevertheless, questions multiply and the detective's restlessness increases. When her real identity is revealed, she becomes symbolic of the scientific, rational questioning and subverting of religious beliefs. The logical conclusion, which helps the detective break the case, comes, on a symbolic level, from the incompatibility between reason and blind faith.

²⁴⁸ Parini, *American Writers*, 15.

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This short story opens up to various hermeneutic possibilities, beginning with an immediate contextual reading based on its first publication date in 1971, which can lead the reader to see it as a parable of the social and political movements of the late Sixties: God was killed by a (highly educated) woman. However, the text can also be read as announcing the changes in the philosophical attitude of the second half of the twentieth century, which caused the end of the traditional philosophical discourse and its being replaced by the discourse of semiotics, pragmatics, or what Fredric Jameson generally terms 'theory'. Thus, "Mr. Big" both exposes the limitations of the detective story formula and offers a solution for enriching it by extending the investigative plot beyond regular crime-related events. Engaging and literalizing the metaphor of the death of God is powerful, though not surprising, as it seems to have become commonplace whenever there is a need to announce a change of paradigm.

Contemporary styles and the 'anything goes' attitude also become the target of Woody Allen's parodical revision. In "The Metterling Lists" Woody Allen parodies what he sees as the hysterical attitude of publishers and critics who encourage artistic and literary extravagance without any solid critical insight. He also includes in his parody the postmodern writers' propensity for choosing a "non-integratable pattern of incongruity, for instance 'mere' succession, which often takes in language the form of the list" as a means of abandoning interiority "to the point that it loses its identity-and structure-building wholeness,"²⁴⁹ as well as the paginal syntax explored by postmodern writers who chose to "extend the aesthetic of fiction into the immediate visual domain of the page, into filling its spaces, [...] in order to emphasize the

²⁴⁹ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 318.

deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and incoherent character of the text."²⁵⁰ Woody Allen exposes gratuitous literary experimentation and its defective critical reception by presenting Metterling, the 'famous writer', and his laundry lists as follows:

Indeed, the very first Metterling laundry list

LIST No. 1

6 prs. shorts

4 undershirts

6 prs. blue socks

4 blue shirts

2 white shirts

6 handkerchiefs

No Starch

serves as a perfect, near-total introduction to this troubled genius, known to his contemporaries as the "Prague Weirdo." The list was dashed off while Metterling was writing *Confessions of a Monstrous Cheese*, that work of stunning philosophical import in which he proved not only that Kant was wrong about the universe but that he never picked up a check. Metterling's dislike of starch is typical of the period, and when this particular bundle came back too stiff Metterling became moody and depressed.²⁵¹

"The Metterling Lists" testifies to Woody Allen's resistance to indulging in extreme, gratuitous experimentation and aligns with his plea for a sense of artistic responsibility. Woody Allen manifests the same type of parodical attitude against hollow criticism and void overinterpretation in his films as well. For instance, *Hollywood Ending* tells the story of a neurotic and anxious film director who is struck by temporary blindness as a somatic reaction to external psychological pressure. He would still shoot

²⁵⁰ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 68.

²⁵¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 143-4.

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the film despite his disability and, although the final result is but a series of incomplete frames, a failure in the eyes of the American public, it is very much appreciated by French film critics who read the incongruous accumulation of scenes as high artistic statement.

Whatever the architecture of Woody Allen's short stories, they build up through excess and exaggeration and end in the amplification of the absurd and the surreal. Woody Allen plays on the comic interrelation between the ordinary and extraordinary, the logical and the absurd, the rational and the irrational. At times, the fantastic, surrealist compositions parodically contrast the existentialist nature of his neurotic anti-hero. In most cases, Woody Allen depends on incongruities and on the literalization of metaphors as strategies for the fantastic, the absurd, and the grotesque, and transforms them by means of an exultant comic mode. He fuses existentialist concerns with playfulness, irony, and parody, and always uses his narrative design to configure another episode of the existential quest of the 'Allen self'. The exuberance of his storytelling becomes yet another marker of his writing and contributes to the authenticity and coherence of his literary style.

2.3. Final remarks

As discussed throughout this entire chapter, Woody Allen's short fiction can be read as a persistent attempt to explore postmodernist narrative mechanisms and chart a broad range of postmodernist fictional strategies, thus mirroring the evolution of the literary experiments of the second half of the twentieth century. He constructs fictional worlds using a very postmodern treatment of time and space. His literary strategies are undoubtedly postmodernist and his ideology does subscribe to postmodern philosophy. He also uses strategies of exaggeration to expose the

shortcomings of the 'anything goes' attitude, which results in a parody of the second order.

Postmodern philosophy is indebted to existentialism and the incorporation of existentialist concerns in the postmodernist literary play is not an uncommon praxis. As William Spanos argues, "the postmodern imagination ... is an existential imagination."²⁵² However, despite the common ideological background of existentialism and postmodernism, which shapes against totalizations and monolithic beliefs, postmodernism goes one step further toward fragmenting subjectivity and contesting authenticity. Existentialism emphasizes the importance of individual authenticity and consolidates the idea of a centered self that has both the privilege of choice and the burden of responsibility. Postmodernism, on the other hand, rejects the idea of a unified individual consciousness and distrusts the concept of individual agency. In Gerhard Hoffmann's words, "the disruptive impulse of postmodern fiction, following the deconstructionist turn, deconstructs the individual subject necessary for an existentialist stance and defies all univocal attitudes and monolithic modes by the multiplicity of inconsistency."²⁵³

Although clearly connected to the aesthetic of postmodernism, Woody Allen's short fiction protects centeredness and authenticity and incorporates the existentialist notion of essence into the postmodernist literary practice in a very specific manner, which becomes the hallmark of his writing. This strong sense of authenticity is primarily supported by the painful self-awareness of the main consciousness of his short fiction, to which we can add his perpetual sense of disgruntlement with the absurd

²⁵² Spanos quoted in Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 201.

²⁵³ Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 202.

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and fragmented reality and the ceaseless attempts to find the means of coping with the meaninglessness of life. Woody Allen experiments with postmodernist literary techniques only to explore the implications of existentialist philosophy in modern Western life and achieves authenticity through his emphasis on responsibility and his unceasing exploration of the absurdity of a potentially godless world.

3.

Jewish influences on Woody Allen's short fiction

3.1. What is Jewish-American literature?

Part of the multicultural and multiethnic paradigm that informs American literature, the debates around what Jewish-American literature is and who can be referred to as a Jewish-American writer are as effervescent as that described at the beginning of the previous chapter, regarding the question of postmodernism and postmodernist literature. The label itself has raised a series of questions, well reflected in the introduction to *Jewish-American Literature. A Norton Anthology*. As the editors confess, they encountered difficulties in assigning the name of the anthology:

“Jewish-American” risks a kind of literary assimilation, and yet behold the strong implantation of Jews in the United States – Nobel literature prizes, a poet laureate – and the richness of their American English. “American Jewish” implies a particularism, a genius and/or a plight endemic to Jews everywhere, and yet witness the strength shared by Robert Pinsky with other poets, not Jews, such as Carolyn Forché and Robert Hass.¹

¹ Jules Chametzky, et al. *Jewish American Literature. A Norton Anthology*. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co, 2001, 3.

The editors do not argue their choice as strongly as they point out the problematic semantics of the term, but work around it through a Jewish anecdote and settle for the most common combination, that of Jewish-American. Nonetheless, the debatable nature of this choice is caused by the difficulty of establishing the main features of what is to be called Jewish-American or American Jewish literary tradition.

The question of distinguishing between a Jewish-American writer and an American writer of Jewish origins has also given rise to rich scholarly discussions, followed by a series of more or less successful attempts to define Jewish-American writing. Although the case of some American writers of Jewish origin, such as J.D. Salinger, Nathanael West, or Norman Mailer, seems to be resolved, the question of defining what exactly is to be called Jewish-American literature and to whom the hyphenated label can be attached is still a matter of debate, all the more so as the contribution of numerous members of this community to both American and world culture is remarkable. As Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer observe in the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Jewish-American Literature*, "[t]hose energies and talents are remarkably evident in the fields of literature and culture. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of these areas in the twentieth-century *without* Jewish artists and writers"².

The attempts to define Jewish-American literature are numerous and revolve around a series of questions. Some critics and theorists advocate the necessity of differentiating between

² Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer, "Introduction: Jewish American Literatures in the Making." *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Eds. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer. Cambridge University Press, 2003. 1-11, 2.

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several different Jewish-American literatures because of the large diversity of challenges and opportunities that have shaped the evolution of different Jewish communities on American soil, while others try to find specific criteria that should help differentiate between Jewish-American literature and the mainstream. The most comfortable definition, which is also the easiest to contest due to its all-encompassing effect, relies on the biographical context of the author and claims that Jewish literature is literature written by Jews³. This approach has proven vulnerable to a series of objections and Hana Wirth-Nesher's insightful questions reveal its limitations and reductionist dimension:

"Do Sholem Aleichem and Nathanael West really inhabit a shared universe in any respect? Is a writer steeped in Jewish liturgy and Hebrew texts, such as S.Y. Agnon, part of the same literary civilization as Arthur Miller or Bruno Schulz?"⁴

If this definition fails due to its "indiscriminate inclusiveness"⁵, the other proposed solution advances a set of questions to be considered when applying the hyphenated label, such as the author's declared ethnicity, religiosity, and the language of the text. However, it has a fairly powerful exclusionist effect. American critic Irving Malin insists on a theological approach by claiming that "only when a Jewish (by birth) writer, moved by religious tensions, shows 'ultimate concern' in creating a new structure of belief, can he be said to create 'Jewish literature'"⁶. The

³ Wirth-Nesher and Kramer, "Introduction", 3.

⁴ Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Indefinable: What Is Jewish Literature?" *What Is Jewish Literature?* Ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher. Skokie, Illinois: Varda Books, 5762/ 2002. 3-14, 3.

⁵ Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Indefinable", 3.

⁶ Irving Malin (ed.), *Contemporary American-Jewish Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973, 7.

same view is shared by writer Cynthia Ozick, who insists on the religious aspect and defines a specific type of sensibility that constitutes, in her opinion, the essential trait of Jewish literature. In Ozick's words, "[b]y 'centrally Jewish' I mean, for literature, whatever touches on the liturgical. Obviously, this does not refer only to prayer. It refers to a type of literature and to a type of perception"⁷. Cynthia Ozick strongly advocates the need for creating a Jewish literature, written by Jews, for the Jewish community. She sees the universalizing tendencies of Jewish writers as a threat to both the survival of their work and that of the Jewish culture. In Ozick's words: "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain."⁸ Ozick vehemently and explicitly excludes assimilated writers, such as Norman Mailer or Philip Roth, and prophesizes that they will become "a small Gentile footnote, about the size of H.L. Mencken"⁹. Although supported by understandable argumentation, these approaches pose the threat of insulation, of inhibiting the productivity of the interaction between Jewish and Gentile cultures.

More complex and ambitious definitions try to identify a Jewish consciousness, a specific imagination, and a particular textual approach. In her attempt to establish a Jewish modern canon, Ruth Wisse claims that "[m]odern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience" and it represents "the

⁷ Cynthia Ozick, "America: Toward Yavneh." *What Is Jewish Literature?* Ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher. Skokie, Illinois: Varda Books, 5762 / 2002. 20-35, 28.

⁸ Ozick, "America: Toward Yavneh", 34.

⁹ Ozick, "America: Toward Yavneh", 29.

most complete way of knowing the inner life of the Jews"¹⁰. The vagueness and all-encompassing nature of this definition might actually be of help when trying to establish a Jewish literary canon, but it fails to help clarify the matter of Jewish-American literature. Bernard Sherman's attempt gives more specific details when he states that a text can be categorized as Jewish-American if "it describes Jews experiencing the problems that were substantially, but not exclusively theirs," problems that he defines as "religious doubt, the clash of generations, assimilation, the marginal relation to American culture"¹¹.

The marginality of Jewish-American literature opens another discussion since the evolution of Jewish literature on American soil is different from that of other ethnic literatures. As Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael Kramer point out,

Between the dominant position of the white majority and the marginal position of peoples of color (having been perceived as such for most of America's history), American Jews have no clearly designated place on America's multicultural map which acknowledges their difference.¹²

This standpoint is also shared by Cristina Deutsch who claims that the relationship between Jewish-American literature and the dominant W.A.S.P. culture relies on a paradoxical dynamic: it is closer to the mainstream than all other ethnic literatures, and, at the same time, it tries to get closer to other marginal literatures through a continuous attempt to distance itself from the

¹⁰ Ruth R. Wise. *The Modern Jewish Canon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 4.

¹¹ Bernard Sherman, *The Invention of the Jew*. New York: Yoseloff, 1969, 17.

¹² Wirth-Nesher and Kramer, "Introduction", 8.

mainstream.¹³ This phenomenon can be explained by the fairly successful assimilation process, potentiated by America's tendency to reinforce cultural amnesia. The European cultural memory was blurred by the new challenges the immigrants were confronted with in the New World, and the negative perception of the Jew has implicitly attenuated once it crossed the ocean. As Leslie Fiedler points out, the Native-Americans and the African-Americans were persecuted by the white Anglo-Saxon Americans, just as the Jews had been persecuted by the European Christians; therefore, discrimination started to operate on the color of the skin and not as much on religious grounds.¹⁴ Cristina Deutsch elaborates on the same question and claims that Jewish-American literature "is a literature of 'white people' that always leaves the impression that it is on the verge of 'being integrated', but always remains regional."¹⁵

Deutsch brings into discussion another important element, the reader. She claims that the "ethnic personality" of writers manifests in their writing styles and thematic choices, but also in the way in which the American readership reacts to their work. This aspect has also been discussed by Hana Wirth Nesher who is of the opinion that the literary work's "characterization as Jewish will depend upon the reader and all of the circumstances of its reception."¹⁶

¹³ Deutsch, Cristina. *Mitul evreului între lumea veche și lumea nouă*. Cluj-Napoca, București: Kriterion, 2005.

¹⁴ Leslie Fiedler. *Waiting for the End. The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1964, 71.

¹⁵ Deutsch, *Mitul evreului*, 16. My translation. In the original: „e o literatură a 'albilor' care ne lasă mereu impresia că e pe punctul de a se 'integra' dar care rămâne în permanență o literatură regională.”

¹⁶ Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Indefinable", 5.

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In his approach to what he labels 'American Jewish' poetry, John Hollander adopts a different position. According to Hollander, notions such as 'Jewish content' or 'Jewish experience' prove empty when it comes to the study of literature (poetry, in his case). He explains that "[s]uch terms as these mean little to poets, and perhaps even less to serious and inquiring literary critics. After all, can anything a Jew experiences — even apostasy — *not* be 'Jewish experience'?"¹⁷ Robert Alter also tends to diminish the importance of the entire endeavor of settling what he calls "this intriguing but treacherous question of Jewish literary identity"¹⁸. Alter argues:

There is something presumptuously proprietary about the whole idea of sorting out writers according to national, ethnic, or religious origins, like so many potatoes whose essential characteristics can be determined by whether they come from Idaho or Maine.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Robert Alter admits that critics cannot "simply discount the possibility that some essentially Jewish qualities may adhere to the writing of the most thoroughly acculturated Jews"²⁰. He also brings up the relevance of the reader within this debate, since it is the reader who might sense, even in the work of these acculturated Jews, "certain modes of imagination or general orientations towards art and experience that seem characteristically Jewish, even where the writer scrupulously

¹⁷ John Hollander. "The Question of American Jewish Poetry." *What Is Jewish Literature?* Ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher. Skokie, Illinois: Varda Books, 5762 / 2002. 36-52, 37.

¹⁸ Robert Alter. "Jewish Dreams and Nightmares." *What Is Jewish Literature?* Ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher. Skokie, Illinois: Varda Books, 5762 / 2002. 53-68, 53.

¹⁹ Alter, "Jewish Dreams", 53.

²⁰ Alter, "Jewish Dreams", 54.

avoids all references to his (or her) ethnic origins.”²¹ The challenge, as Alter sees it, is “to translate such vague intuitions into clear descriptive statements about what actually goes on in the literary works”²². Mark Shechner goes even further in dismissing the necessity of defining Jewish-American literature through his refusal to undertake such a task, motivated by the cultural attenuation that has become the paradigm of the Jewish experience in America. In Shechner’s words, “neither ‘Jewish writer’ nor ‘Jewish fiction’ is an obvious or self-justifying subdivision of literature, any more than Jewishness itself is now a self-evident cultural identity.”²³ Nonetheless, he admits that there is a certain kind of specialness in the work of Jewish writers, which intrigues scholars but eludes defining attempts.

According to Hana Wirth-Nesher, the difficulty of defining Jewish-American literature (or Jewish literature, in general) resides in the “impossibility of arriving at a universally acceptable definition of who is a Jew”²⁴. David Brauner also insists on the polyvalence of Jewish identity, by providing a survey of the various positions adopted by theorists involved in this discussion:

For some ... Jewishness is an innate, inalienable property, for others a learned tradition; for some, a belief system, for others a cultural construct; for some a race, for others a religion; for some a nationality, for others a sensibility; for some a historical legacy, for others a metaphysical state.²⁵

²¹ Alter, “Jewish Dreams”, 54.

²² Alter, “Jewish Dreams”, 55.

²³ Mark Shechner. “Jewish Writers”. *The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, Ed. Daniel Hoffman, Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013, 191-239, 191.

²⁴ Wirth-Nesher, “Defining the Indefinable”, 3.

²⁵ Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction*, 3.

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Undoubtedly, the richness and the complexity of this question continuously nourish the debate about its literary representation. If the ambiguities of Jewish identity raise a series of unsolved questions for critics and theorists, they open a wide spectrum of possibilities that stimulate creativity and challenge writers to further explore the infrastructure of identification and expression. As Philip Roth confessed, writers are not always aware of the implications of their Jewish cultural legacy, nor do they know what to do with it, but this uncertainty can be transformed into a source of artistic freedom. In Philip Roth's words,

The circumstance of being born a Jew in America was a very special one in that it announced not only the specialness of being born, but a kind of extra-specialness, the specialness of having been a Jew or being a Jew. This, however, remained a mysterious thing: one did not know exactly what it was and so one had to invent being a Jew.²⁶

A similar understanding of this question is embraced by Julian Levinson, who insists on moving the focal point of the discussion from the struggle to define a normative 'Jewish sensibility', toward the exploration of "how Jewish writers have drawn on multiple resources to project new models of identity"²⁷. In Levinson's opinion, confining literary texts to specific categories is grossly reductionist since the identification or coinage of definitive elements "leave little room for the imaginative, inventive, intentional, and dialectical processes of cultural production"²⁸.

While still an unresolved matter, the debate around the definition of Jewish-American literature unfolds a generous

²⁶ Roth quoted in Malin, *Contemporary American-Jewish Literature*, 6.

²⁷ Julian Levinson. *Exiles on Mains Street. Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008, 5.

²⁸ Levinson, *Exiles on Mains Street*, 8.

palette of argumentative material pertaining to a wide range of theoretical standpoints, using different methodologies and vocabularies, ranging from theological to thematic, arguing for a homogenous aesthetic creed, either emphasizing the ethnic awareness of the author or leaving the hermeneutic responsibility to the reader. As discussed above, some scholars consider it a matter of uttermost necessity, whereas others tend to diminish its importance. Cumulatively, the impressive list of factors involved in the debate represents what Wirth-Nesher calls "a classic case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts"²⁹.

Although the resolution of this matter is beyond the scope of this book, I believe that the discussion about the relation between literary qualities and the implications of ethnic ancestry and upbringing has considerable relevance to any assessment of the work of writers who share their community's cultural and social experience, regardless of their admittance or denial of ethnic association altogether. In my opinion, theories which emphasize the importance of exploring the literary reshaping or the 'reinvention' of Jewish identity and Jewish modes of expression are more plausible within the multicultural context of American literature than those that tend to prescribe specific guidelines for how the Jewish identity and experience should be reflected in fiction, or in any other form of cultural manifestation. They are also more helpful in the specific case of Woody Allen, who incorporates in his short fiction resources that testify to the author's intimate relationship to his Jewish heritage, without necessarily turning them into the focal point of his writing.

In Woody Allen's short fiction, Jewishness and Americanness do not function as oppositional cultural poles that incite trolling

²⁹ Wirth-Nesher, "Defining the Indefinable", 4.

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about in search of identity, but rather as mutually inclusive elements that define the space of his artistic creativity. Woody Allen's work clearly reflects the cultural coalescence of both his Jewish upbringing and his urban American background. He does not chronicle the drama of assimilation but works with the results of the process. The pervading influence of his Jewish background, as well as that of his urban American lifestyle, can be sensed throughout his fiction. Therefore, the main objective of this section is to explore those elements and influences coming from Woody Allen's Jewish cultural legacy and see how they shape his literary universe. When assessing Allen's short stories from an ethnic perspective, an interesting pattern emerges: all the main characters are American Jews, the urban space is reconfigured through a Jewish perspective, and although he does not choose to elaborate on his own predicament as a Jew, the historical memory of oppression and discrimination is blazingly vivid through the countless allusions that stud his short stories. In order to assess how the Jewish cultural heritage informs Woody Allen's short fiction, this chapter discusses his position with respect to his ethnic background, the Jewish stereotypes he operates with, and the legacy of the Jewish humorous tradition. I have also dedicated a subchapter to the investigation of Woody Allen's short stories from a thematic perspective given that such approaches seem to be favored among theorists who debate the question of Jewish-American literature.

3.2. How Jewish is Woody Allen's work?

A product of a hyphenated culture, Woody Allen's work incorporates the strong influences coming from each side of the hyphen. He succeeds in representing the contemporary urban

American experience, while also reflecting his connection to the Jewish culture, which sometimes feels stronger than he might like to admit. In a 1976 interview, Woody Allen attempts to diminish the importance of his Jewish cultural heritage: "I don't have that [Philip Roth's] Jewish obsession. I use my background when it's expedient for me in work. But it's not really an obsession of mine and I never had that obsession with Gentile women"³⁰. Allen might be sincere and he might feel that his work is not as tributary to his Jewish legacy as that of Philip Roth. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that Roth himself was also fairly reticent to the inclusion of his work in ethnically-defined categories: "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew"³¹, Roth said.

The refusal of having the ethnic label attached to their work can be said to have almost created a tradition among Jewish-born American intellectuals. This attitude appears to be fairly popular, especially among those writers and literary critics associated with the group referred to as the *New York Intellectuals*. For example, Lionel Trilling rejects the association of his work with his Jewish ancestry, although he admits to having considerable respect for the long Jewish tradition.³² Another member of the group, Alfred Kazin, explains this reluctance of ethnic association through the principles of the left-wing politics advocated by the group. Alfred Kazin writes:

Like many Jewish intellectuals of my time and place brought up to revere the universalism of the Socialist ideal and of modern

³⁰ Woody Allen, "A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen." 1976. with Ken Kelley. *Woody Allen Interviews*. Ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Katie Coblenitz. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. 7-28, 24.

³¹ Roth quoted in Wise, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 11.

³² Lionel Trilling, "Under Forty." *The Literature of American Jews*. Ed. Theodore L. Gross. New York: The Free Press, 1973. 358-360.

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culture, I had equated 'Jewish' magazines with a certain insularity of tone, subject matter, writers' names – with mediocrity. To be a 'Jewish writer' ... was somehow to regress, to strike attitudes, to thwart the natural complexities of truth. There were just too many imprecisions [sic] and suppressions in the parochially satisfied 'Jewish' writer. It was enough to be a Jew *and* a writer.³³

Another literary critic and sympathizer of the Marxist doctrine, Irving Howe, writes about his relation to his Jewish ancestry in similar terms:

People like me tended to subordinate our sense of Jewishness to cosmopolitan culture and socialist politics. We did not think well or deeply on the matter of Jewishness – you might say we avoided thinking about it. Jewishness [...] did not form part of a conscious commitment, it was not regarded as a major component of the culture I wanted to make my own [...] While it would be shameful to deny its presence or seek to flee its stigma, my friends and I could hardly be said to have thought Jewishness could do much for us or we for it.³⁴

Still, it is important to remember that Howe translated Yiddish stories into English and taught English and Yiddish literature at Brandeis University.

Woody Allen's statements are consistent with this tradition of denying the formative value of the Jewish tradition, at least during the first part of his career. He exhibits the same apparently dismissive attitude towards his Jewish legacy in an interview by Natalie Gittelson, published in *New York Times Magazine* in 1979, where he declares that there is no premeditation in the way his ethnic legacy surfaces in his work:

³³ Kazin quoted in Gross, Theodore L., ed. *The Literature of American Jews*. New York: Free Press, 1973, 178.

³⁴ Howe quoted in Brauner, *Post-War Jewish Fiction*, 10.

It's not on my mind: it's no part of my artistic consciousness. There are certain cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews, I guess, but I think they're largely superficial. Of course, any character I play would be Jewish, just because I'm Jewish. I'm also metropolitan oriented. I wouldn't play a farmer or an Irish seaman. So I write about metropolitan characters who happen to be Jewish.³⁵

Sam Girgus claims that Woody Allen's statement "evidences a considerable degree of denial and blindness about this aspect of his life and work"³⁶. Richard Blake argues that "Jewishness, as it generally appears in Woody Allen's films, is a cultural phenomenon, a relic of childhood that he has dragged into adult life"³⁷. However, my contention is that his attitude should not be seen as a trivialization of the relevance of the Jewish influence on his work, but rather as an unpremeditated attempt at universalizing the Jewish experience. My argumentation relies on a correlation with one of Woody Allen's statements in a 1979 interview by Frank Rich, where Allen extrapolates the tragedy of Jewish history to cover the hardships of mankind. Woody Allen says that "... the metaphor for life is a concentration camp. I do believe that. The real question in life is how one copes in that crisis."³⁸ Moreover, in the 1990 essay "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind" Woody Allen strongly advocates against the confinement of cultural productions to little ethnic drawers:

³⁵ Woody Allen, "The Maturing of Woody Allen", interview by Natalie Gittelson, *The New York Times*, April 22, 1979. <https://www.nytimes.com>

³⁶ Girgus, *The Films*, 131.

³⁷ Richard Blake, *Woody Allen. Profane and Sacred*. Lanham, Md. & London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1995, 11.

³⁸ Woody Allen, "An Interview with Woody." 1979. Interview by Frank Rich. *Woody Allen Interviews*. Ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Katie Coblenz. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. 43-48, 46.

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On the cover of this magazine, under the title, is printed the line: A Bimonthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society. But why a Jewish critique? Or a gentile critique? Or any limiting perspective? Why not simply a magazine with articles written by human beings for other humans to read? Aren't there enough real demarcations without creating artificial ones? After all, there's no biological difference between a Jew and a gentile despite what my Uncle Max says. We're talking here about exclusive clubs that serve no good purpose; they exist only to form barriers, trade commercially on human misery, and provide additional differences amongst people so they can further rationalize their natural distrust and aggression.³⁹

This tendency towards universalization, although blamed by writers such as Cynthia Ozick, is not uncommon among Jewish-American writers; we can find its best articulation in Bernard Malamud's notorious statement: "All men are Jews except they don't know it."⁴⁰

With Jewish-American writers, the translation of the Jewish experience and of the ambiguities of Jewish identities into universalization has both pragmatic and metaphorical valences. On the one hand, by refusing the ethnic labeling, writers strive to escape the confinement to a community-specific, marginal literature and, on the other hand, they turn the ambiguities of the Jewish identity and the richness of the Jewish experience into metaphors that allow them to further explore the turmoil of human existence. Within this context, Woody Allen's reluctance to having his Jewish heritage insisted upon invites reconsideration. In his

³⁹ Woody Allen, "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind." *Tikkun* Jan/Feb 1990: 13-15. Online. Accessed on 17 May 2012, 14.

⁴⁰ Malamud quoted in Joyce Field and Leslie Field. "An Interview with Bernard Malamud. 1973." *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*. Ed. Lawrence Lasher. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 35-46, 39.

more recent comments on this issue, he reiterates the distinction between the religious and the cultural dimension of Jewishness. Despite his Jewish upbringing, he distanced himself from religious practice and claims to be indifferent to the Jewish rituals:

I was unmoved by the synagogue, I was not interested in the *seder*, I was not interested in the Hebrew school, I was not interested in being Jewish. It just didn't mean a thing to me. I was not ashamed of it nor was I proud of it. It was a non factor to me, I didn't care about it.⁴¹

The disengagement with Jewish religious practice should not be understood as a repudiation of his cultural background. In a 2012 interview by Yaniv Halili, translated and quoted by J.J. Goldberg, Woody Allen makes a clear distinction between the ethnic and the religious components of his Jewishness. Even though he dismisses the association with organized religion, he does not understate the importance of his Jewish cultural legacy. In Woody Allen's words,

I grew up in a Jewish atmosphere (al birkei ha-yahadut) and they made me a bar mitzvah, so clearly it's an element that will remain in my life permanently, just like the songs I listened to on the radio when I was a child. But I don't believe in organized religions. Most of them exploit people, and I think these clubs have nothing to do with God. Today I feel Jewish mainly when people attack me because of my being Jewish.⁴²

As discussed in the previous subsection, one of the most important questions in referring to a writer as Jewish-American has to do with how the readers perceive their work. While

⁴¹ Allen quoted in Eric Lax, *Woody Allen: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991, 12.

⁴² Allen quoted in Goldberg, J.J. "Woody Allen Talks Israel, With ... (Surprise!) Love." *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 11 July 2012.

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exploring Jewish ethnicity on stage and screen, Henry Bial analyzes the tendency of writers and artists such as Arthur Miller, Gertrude Berg, Joseph Stein, Barbra Streisand, and Woody Allen to neglect or abandon any preoccupation with their ethnic belonging. Bial interprets this attitude as a privilege they could enjoy due to the ability of the audience to negotiate meaning by bringing in all necessary cultural references. In Henry Bial's words,

They could react against an essentialist view of Jewishness precisely because they had direct experience with it. They could freely adapt, abandon, and 'play' with elements of their Jewishness because they and their Jewish audiences brought enough extratextual experience to the performance to supply the culturally specific context.⁴³

Sanford Pinsker also points to the advantages of the hospitable social and cultural climate of the 1960s, "a cultural moment in which you didn't have to be Jewish to enjoy Levy's rye bread or to know a few Yiddish words."⁴⁴

Woody Allen's Jewishness has always been of interest to the scholars exploring his work and has become an essential mark of his signature. As Gerald Mast points out, "Allen, unJewish, is as unthinkable as Chaplin without his cane, Groucho without his cigar, or Fields without his nose."⁴⁵ Foster Hirsch argues that, although Woody Allen does not write for the Jewish community, the strong Jewish connection framing his work and the visible Jewish influences that mark his creative activity include him in the

⁴³ Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish. Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008, 110.

⁴⁴ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 168.

⁴⁵ Gerald Mast. "'Woody Allen: The Neurotic Jew as American Clown.'" *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. 125-140, 126.

panoply of the most representative Jewish-American writers and artists. In Hirsch's words,

You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate Woody Allen's work. But it helps. For along with Bob Hope and Mort Stahl, Chaplin and the Marx Brothers, Ingmar Bergman and Sergei Eisenstein, Allen's inescapable Jewishness has been a major influence in his work. As a Jewish comic he inherits a rich oral and literary tradition that runs from the low-brow self-mockery and mother-in-law gags of Borscht-belt jokesters to the complex modernist stories and novels of a group of writers that includes Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, J.D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, and Joseph Heller. Allen shares with all the Jewish humorists, from the lowliest Catskill comic to the Bellow-Malamud-Roth literary triumvirate, an iconic sense of self and the world, and a joy in language.⁴⁶

Susan Gubar includes Woody Allen's name in the list of representatives of the so-called "Jewish American Renaissance", alongside writers such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, and Stanley Elkin,⁴⁷ and one of his short stories, "The Scrolls" is anthologized in the *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*.

Although Woody Allen has an uneasy relation to normative Judaism and his ingress into the Jewish tradition is, in some ways, more limited than that of other Jewish-American writers who chronicle the drama of assimilation or focus on the retrieval of the Yiddishkeit, his work captures the dialectics of Jewish thinking. The ways in which he designs his main characters establish a

⁴⁶ Foster Hirsch. *Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life. The Films of Woody Allen*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001, 131.

⁴⁷ See Susan Gubar, "Jewish American Women Writers and the Race Question", *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. Ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 232.

lineage to the tradition of the reinvention of the Jew and to the literary precedents that tend to universalize Jewish experience. Woody Allen does not write with the purpose of giving a voice to his community; he is not driven by a strong sense of belonging, nor by the anxiety of identity. What is at stake with Woody Allen's fiction is much more general and universal. He directs his creative energies to struggling with mortality, searching for and questioning God, and to exploring the dynamics of human interaction, and he does so by turning the turmoil of the Jewish neurotic into universal human trials and tribulations. Although he insists on advocating his primacy as an artist over his Jewish-American cultural identity, his attitude and perspective make his writing distinct from that of non-Jewish writers.

3.3. The Allenesque *schlemiel*

Cultural stereotyping is a very complex socio-cultural phenomenon, displaying both positive and negative functions. On the one hand, it helps individuals structure their experiences and interactions and responds to their cognitive need for categorization. On the other hand, the formation of stereotypes is based on oversimplified judgments and generalizations, on standardized preconceptions which can easily attract frightening negative connotations. In the nineteenth century, the term was used to describe repetitive and inflexible behavioral patterns, but in the twentieth, the definition of stereotypes moved towards "traits ascribed to various racial and ethnic groups"⁴⁸. When the discussion about stereotypes focuses on the Jewish community,

⁴⁸ David J. Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping*. New York & London: The Guilford Press, 2004, 9.

Eric Santner's claim that the Jew is "one for whom stereotyping is . . . his typical problem"⁴⁹ captures the essence of the discussion.

Jewish culture has produced an impressive panoply of stereotypical characters, ranging from "the schlemiel, schlimazl, and nebbish of the Old World to the neurotic Jew, Jewish mother, and Jewish American Princess (JAP) of the New"⁵⁰. Interestingly enough, the stereotypes and behavioral clichés associated to Jewishness have been created mainly from within the Jewish community. The stereotyping process draws on religious practice, Jewish behavior, and the Jewish body. Although impacted by the interaction with other cultures, this process has been potentiated by the particular predisposition towards self-deprecation of the Jewish community, a typical characteristic of Jewish humor. By the time Woody Allen begins his writing career, in the 1960s, "Jewish cultural stereotypes were popular sources for comedy among both Jews and gentiles in the United States"⁵¹. Therefore, writers and artists could readily introduce them in their work, as prefabricated ingredients. Woody Allen explores a large array of characteristics stereotypically associated with the Jews, from bodily traits, such as

⁴⁹ Santner quoted in Ruth D. Johnston, "The Construction of Jewish Postmodern Identity in Contemporary Theory and American Film." *You Should See Yourself. Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*. Ed. Vincent Brook. New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2006. 207-229, 208.

⁵⁰ Vincent Brook, "'Y'all Killed Him, We Didn't!' Jewish Self-Hatred and The Larry Sanders Show." *You Should See Yourself. Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*. Ed. Vincent Brook. New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2006. 298 – 318, 300.

⁵¹ Jan Lewis, "'Your World Is Very Different from Mine': Troubling Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Theater." *You Should See Yourself. Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*. Ed. Vincent Brook. New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2006. 57-75, 72.

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physical weakness or the Jewish nose, to professional clichés. When it comes to characters, he works primarily with those stereotypes that are involved in male-female relationships: the *schlemiel*, the Jewish wife, the Jewish mother, and the *shiksa*.

On screen, Woody Allen created a persona that is easily identifiable as Jewish, especially because of the visible lineage to the *schlemiel* stereotype born within the Jewish cultural tradition and developed through the work of countless Jewish artists and writers. The main characters in Woody Allen's short fiction draw from the same stereotype. Allen revalorizes and urbanizes the *schlemiel* by refashioning it in the tradition of *The New Yorker's* Little Man, a neurotic type "driven insane by jumbo women and modern life—especially things technical or commercial."⁵² These features, combined with Allen's penchant for philosophical musings and erudite references, turn his *schlemiel* into the quintessential New York Jew, an Allenesque stereotypical character destined for failure, always having a hand in his own misfortunes, overwhelmed by anxiety and despair, and unable to cope with the realities of what he perceives as a hostile environment. The ethnic code built into the Jewish tradition always endorses the reflexive irony of Allen's main characters; strategies of self-ridicule target their physical weakness, fragile masculinity, cowardice and submissive attitude, their gullible innocence as well as their powerlessness against the fearsome modern urban environment.

The *schlemiel*, "the man who unwittingly sets comic disaster into motion"⁵³, is deeply rooted in the Jewish oral tradition and plays a crucial role in relation to the Jewish cultural identity. Most

⁵² Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 6. See also 258–61.

⁵³ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 170.

cultures have their own fools and jesters, but the *schlemiel* has gained a degree of notoriety unknown to others. Some scholars traced the origins of the character back to the biblical text, others consider that such figures started to appear in the oral tradition around the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian,⁵⁴ while others argue that the *schlemiel* originates in medieval folk tales.

Although the exact origins of the character are difficult to pinpoint, the *schlemiel* became the central figure of the *shtetl* humorous tradition, together with his kin, the *schlimazel*. Apparently, the two folk figures have been assigned specific complementary roles and “the cliché would have it that the *schlemiel* is the poor soul who spills his bowl of soup, while the *schlimazl* is the poor soul he spills it on.”⁵⁵ While the *schlemiel* is the simpleton, incapable of assimilating and processing information, the *schlimazel*, “[p]ossessing a keener, more rational mind, [...] tries to integrate more information than he should.”⁵⁶ The *schlemiel* lacks the skills to fit in and is always perceived as the outsider, but the *schlimazel* does everything by the book and yet, failure haunts him everywhere.⁵⁷ In time, the figure of the *schlemiel* has gained more notoriety and has been assigned a series of characteristics that had originally been attributed to the *schlimazel*. Although the *schlemiel* is always the center of comic failure, the attributes and traits defining this character type are often contradictory. If, for instance, some anecdotes and folktales portray him as dominated by others, ignorant of worldly matters,

⁵⁴ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 10.

⁵⁵ Jay Boyer. “The Schlemiezel: Black Humor and the Shtetl Tradition.” *Semites and Stereotypes. Characteristics of Jewish Humor*. Eds. Anat Zajdman and Avner Ziv. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1993. 3-12, 5.

⁵⁶ Boyer, “The Schlemiezel”, 6.

⁵⁷ Boyer, “The Schlemiezel”, 6.

and a cuckold, others present him as the unfaithful one. In some situations, the *schlemiel* appears a luckless simpleton, whilst in others, he surprises with the wittiness behind his strong sense of self-deprecation.

The evolution of this cultural character brings along a series of ambiguities and contradictions that make its confinement within the framework of a single definition a fairly difficult task. As Ruth Wise pointed out,

Since Jewry's attitudes toward its own frailty were complex and contradictory, the *schlemiel* was sometimes berated for his foolish weakness, and elsewhere exalted for his hard inner strength. For the reformers who sought ways of strengthening and improving Jewish life and laws, the *schlemiel* embodied those negative qualities of weakness that had to be ridiculed to be overcome. Conversely, to the degree that Jews looked upon their disabilities as external afflictions, sustained through no fault of their own, they used the *schlemiel* as the model of endurance, his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might.⁵⁸

Regardless of the stereotype's representational instability, which brings along a wide array of configurations, the figure of the *schlemiel* is essential to the Jewish tradition; it represents "the central link among the major work in this literary and comic tradition"⁵⁹.

The *schlemiel* began its literary career at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in *Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story*, a novella by German writer Adelbert von Chamisso. The Jewish folk figure of the *schlemiel* transcended Chamisso's dark, romantic, Faustic

⁵⁸ Ruth R. Wise. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, 5.

⁵⁹ Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death*, 131.

description. It preserved the characteristics it had acquired as the central mock-pathetic figure of Jewish folk anecdotes and has been engaged as such in the work of many Jewish writers, from Mendele Mocher Sforim and Sholom Aleichem to Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Hershel Ostropolier, Motke Chabad (or Habad), Shelumiel, or the sages of Chelm of Eastern European Jewish folk tradition are the forefathers of famous literary characters like Sholom Aleichem's Tevye, Isaac Bashevis Singer's Gimpel the Fool, Saul Bellow's Herzog, Bernard Malamud's Fidelman, Philip Roth's Portnoy, Joseph Heller's Yossarian, and Woody Allen's persona. They all share the intriguing allure of the fool-as-protagonist; they are all disillusioned lovers, tormented by anxiety, self-conscious and analytical, treating their *tsuris* with irony, self-deprecation, and bitterness.

As Pinsker explains, the "*schlemiel* of Yiddish literature suggested the continual shifting between ambition and defeat that characterized the experiences of East European Jewry"⁶⁰. When the character crossed the ocean, it became the antithetic figure of the macho type; it gained popularity through the work of Jewish-American writers and infiltrated the mainstream literary tradition. Most scholars explain the success and the popularity of the *schlemiel* in the American culture by its compatibility with the condition of the individual living in the Western society of the twentieth century. Ezra Greenspan argues that the *schlemiels* of Daniel Fuchs and Nathanael West are quintessential representations of the modern man, confronted with the gloom and anxiety of the Depression, but their success was belated because of the American cult for prowess and manliness translated as physical power and determination to take control over the

⁶⁰ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 15.

situation.⁶¹ However, the bitter legacy of World War II, followed by the harshness of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the effervescence of the Long Sixties configured an unstable reality in which everything seemed to have gotten beyond the individuals' control. The American society of the second half of the twentieth century was confronted with confusing change, with the alteration of life-style, and with the rearranging of the hierarchy of values and the system of beliefs, which called for a new type of heroic figure that would represent the post-war sensibility better than the macho hero. This explains, to a large extent, the popularity of Jewish-American writers who used the figure of the *schlemiel* to epitomize the experience of the twentieth-century angst-driven individual and invited the *schlemiel* into the mainstream literary tradition.⁶²

The *schlemiel* is a metaphorical character that can move from representing the quotidian realities and hardships of the Jewish community to epitomizing the tribulations and fears of modern man. The characteristics of the *schlemiel* have been forged by exposure to different types of oppression. Ezra Greenspan elaborates on the universalizing potential *schlemiel* by pointing out that "[w]hoever suffered injustice, poverty, humiliation, and persecution and responded with endurance, bittersweet humor, and irony might readily play the *schlemiel*"⁶³. Thus, the *schlemiel* became a central figure in the work of post-World War II Jewish writers and also one of the favorite character types of the black humorists.

⁶¹ Ezra Greenspan. *The Schlemiel Comes to America*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983, 96.

⁶² Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 77.

⁶³ Greenspan, *The Schlemiel*, 6.

As the mythology of the American Dream and the exceptionalism of the self-reliant hero have been shattered by the harshness of post-war realities, writers turn to re-narrate a reality that corresponds to "the America of dissembling and disbelief"⁶⁴, which calls for a different type of hero. This new character is what Stephanie Halldorson calls the "non-hero" and what Jay Boyer connects with the *schlemiel*, the figure of the anti-hero. As Jay Boyer noted, "a literature we associate with Barth, William Burroughs, Pynchon, James Purdy, a rather WASPish group, really, may owe a significant debt to the fools of Eastern European *shtetl* tradition, the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazel*"⁶⁵. In Jay Boyer's opinion, these writers needed to create "a new notion of American manhood, American man as *Homo incapacitus* [...], where man is defined by his incapacities — a notion offering us in place of the fool and his goodness only the sense of man's loss"⁶⁶. Sanford Pinsker also discusses a paradigm shift in the image of the American hero:

In short, things changed. But in certain ways they also remained the same. By that I mean, the itch to brag was still a recognizable feature of American humor, but it had moved to the other side of the stick. Urban versions of the ring-tailed roarer tended to put the emphasis on ineptitude rather than accomplishment, on deep-seated inferiorities rather than swaggering confidence. The result is a heroic *schlemiel*hood, one which substitutes the *nebbish* for the backwoodsman, the man who can do nothing right for the one who could do nothing wrong.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Stephanie S. Halldorson. *The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 10.

⁶⁵ Boyer, "The Schlemiezel", 5.

⁶⁶ Boyer, "The Schlemiezel", 12.

⁶⁷ Pinsker, "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones", 170.

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Besides the in-depth exploration of the psychosocial implications of this import of elements belonging to the *shtetl* tradition into the American literary mainstream, Jay Boyer also tackles the impact that this process has had on the classical folk figures. They had undergone considerable transmutation, both through the work of Jewish-American writers and through that of the black humorists. Boyer argues that the crossing of the ocean blurred the differences between the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazel* and that a new typological figure was born, a "peculiarly modern, American protagonist, the *schlemiezel*."⁶⁸ Jay Boyer defines the *schlemiezel* as a paradigmatic figure for the East Coast urban individual, who lives as an outsider in a fragmented world he cannot control. In Jay Boyer's words,

I mean by *schlemiezel* a protagonist who has only lately come to our novels, one who is a loser, a failure, a man out of control, a city dweller living most often on the East Coast, and, matters of proper geography aside, an 'immigrant' who feels he lives among 'natives'.⁶⁹

The use of the *schlemiezel* also contributes to the shift toward a more urban culture. American oral and literary tradition had cultivated the figure of the macho hero, always in control of his destiny, conquering the wilderness and pushing the frontier. On the other hand, the *schlemiezel* is too weak to tame the wilderness and would therefore need the protection of the urban environment.⁷⁰

Woody Allen's work had a remarkable impact on this paradigm shift. The character he created, the deeply neurotic, urban to the bone persona, completely lacking traditionally heroic

⁶⁸ Boyer, "The Schlemiezel", 5.

⁶⁹ Boyer, "The Schlemiezel", 4-5.

⁷⁰ Boyer, "The Schlemiezel", 11.

attributes, contributed to the transformation of the angst-ridden weakling into a national cultural hero. As Sanford Pinsker points out,

No figure epitomizes this radical shift from the exaggerations of the rough-and-ready to those of the neurotic whiner quite like Woody Allen. He is the Little Man incarnate. All the convulsions of our century seem to be balanced on his slight, ineffectual shoulders.⁷¹

Woody Allen's comic persona, born during the night-club years and later developed in his films and short stories, draws on the stereotypes of the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazel* and fits perfectly the definition Jay Boyer gave to this recently branded category, the *schlemiezel*. *Schlemiezel* might be a more appropriate term in the discussion about the persona Woody Allen created on stage and screen and the self he constructed in his short stories, but I will keep referring to it as the *schlemiel* since this is the term used by most critics and theorists who investigate Woody Allen's work; continuing with the same term will prevent confusion. It is, however, clear that the *schlemiel* of folktales has undergone significant changes by entering the American literary scene.

According to Graham McCann, the Allen persona closely resembles the Pantheon of literary *schlemiels* created by the most famous Jewish-American writers, from Gimpel to Herzog, Fidelman, Yossarian, and Portnoy. McCann contends that this lineage is based on their intellectual abilities, their emotional instability, and their powerlessness. In McCann's words,

They have been through 'civilizing process', and they *still*, on occasion, find themselves moved by primitive lust; they understand Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, they have a strong sense of moral urgency, yet they still tumble and fail and fall in

⁷¹ Pinsker, "Jumping on Hollywood's Bones", 171.

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love and hurt themselves and their hopes and their lovers. Intellect and lust fight each other to the death inside these characters, and they convey us their terrible sense of helplessness as they experience the battle.⁷²

While this appreciation might be true to a certain extent, it also contains a few misattributions, caused mainly by the attempt to contain all the characters within the same phrase. David Biale also insists on the sexual dimension of Woody Allen's *schlemiel* by claiming that it represents "the Jew as Sexual Schlemiel ... the little man with the big libido and the even bigger sexual neurosis, a character comically unable to consummate his desire"⁷³. Lust and impotence might be the focus of some of Woody Allen's early gags and films, but when it comes to his short stories, things are considerably different. Although sexual woes come up in Allen's short stories, especially when they tackle marriage, the main struggle that consumes the *schlemiel* of Woody Allen's short stories is with God, with the fundamentally hostile and absurd reality he lives in, and with his own mortality.

Foster Hirsch also elaborates on the same association between Woody Allen's *schlemiel* persona and the large family of canonized *schlemiels*. Hirsch builds a stronger and more consistent argument, focusing on certain essential features, identifiable in the entire family of Jewish-American *schlemiels*. He grounds his argumentation on their being all "outsiders and victims, the butt of jokes both local and cosmic", subject to failure and ironically reacting to their fate⁷⁴. These common features are, of course, enriched by authors who add to the classical folk figure by

⁷² McCann, *Woody Allen: New Yorker*, 54.

⁷³ Biale quoted in Bial, *Acting Jewish*, 93.

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Love, Sex, Death*, 132.

emphasizing or remodeling a specific trait. Thus, the *schlemiel* appears as the intellectual misfit, the wise fool, the sexually challenged individual, or the urban neurotic. Sanford Pinsker explains the transformations undergone by the figure of the *schlemiel* in terms of a transition from the socioeconomic to the metaphysical. In Pinsker's words,

The *schlemiel* may well have been a comic figure whose self-created failures became an index of socioeconomic limitation, but such a character is out of place in arenas of affluence and endless mobility. [...] For American Jewish writers, the figure of the *schlemiel* became a way of dealing with the more troubling aspects of this condition, a way of talking about moral transcendence rather than economic advancement.⁷⁵

Although the credit for the notoriety of Woody Allen's *schlemiel* goes to Allen's films, his short stories proved to be a favorable environment for experimenting with this stereotype. As explained by Robert Alter, the short story is the most appropriate genre for this stereotypical character because the inherent constraints and the economy of the genre help preserve much of the classical folk character's essential traits.⁷⁶ In Woody Allen's short fiction, *schlemielhood* dates back to biblical times. In "The Scrolls", he parodies the stories of Abraham and Job. Abraham is presented as God's fool. When getting ready to sacrifice his son, he finds out that the Lord took advantage of his willingness to believe. Abraham's blind faith is translated as gullibility, and the moral of the story turns out to be extremely different from the traditional biblical interpretation. The entire affair is presented as an attempt

⁷⁵ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 78-79.

⁷⁶ Alter quoted in Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 89.

to strengthen his character and make him less confident in the goodness of higher powers:

'Never mind what I said,' the Lord spake. 'Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?' And Abraham grew ashamed. 'Er-not really ... no.'

'I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it.'

And Abraham fell to his knees, 'See, I never know when you're kidding.'

And the Lord thundered, 'No sense of humor. I can't believe it.'

'But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?'

And the Lord said, 'It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.'⁷⁷

Woody Allen's Abraham has been taught a lesson that can be construed as a reaction to those *schlemiel* figures that draw their wisdom and strength from religion, like Gimpel, who endures and accepts deception as a sign of faith. However, the scope of Allen's postmodernist parody is larger here; it can easily be extended to all forms of manipulation and simpleminded obedience.

Job, on the other hand, has a different experience with God and reacts differently to the supernal misfortunes that swooped down upon him. Unlike the biblical text, after the wager with Satan, it is God who begins to bullyrag Job, not Satan. The Lord "smote him on the head and again on the ear and pushed him into an thick sauce so as to make Job sticky and vile and then He slew a tenth part of Job's kine,"⁷⁸ and then continued to wreak havoc over his pastures. Job, however, is not the weak simpleton the Lord expects him to be; he grabs God around the neck and starts

⁷⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 36.

⁷⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 34.

questioning him about his erratic behavior. When God refuses to answer, invoking his almightiness, Job reacts:

'That's no answer,' Job said. 'And for someone who's supposed to be omnipotent, let me tell you, 'tabernacle' has only one I.' Then Job fell to his knees and cried to the Lord, 'Thine is the kingdom and the power and glory. Thou hast a good job. Don't blow it.'⁷⁹

The confronting attitude adopted by Woody Allen's Job can be easily connected to the Talmudic and Mishnaic interpretations by which several rabbis agree that Job was, in fact, a sinner. The medieval Spanish philosopher, Maimonides, also interpreted the book of Job as an act of divine punishment by presenting Job as an "evolving philosopher who hurled baseless accusations at God because he simply did not understand the true nature of the universe"⁸⁰. Destroying the presumption of righteousness and innocence in the case of Job was crucial, for otherwise, the sages of the sacred texts would not be able to offer an explanation for the apparently gratuitous actions of a sadistic God. Nevertheless, from Woody Allen's perspective, the boldness of Job's actions is not in the least to be considered sinful, but just a reminder that with "divine power, there must be divine responsibility"⁸¹.

In "The Scrolls", Woody Allen explores two opposite attitudes to religion: simpleminded submissiveness and transactional awareness. While Abraham fits the *schlemiel* prototype and falls for

⁷⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 35.

⁸⁰ Jason Kalman, "Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust." *Jews and Humor. Studies in Jewish Civilization*. Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Symposium of the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization. Ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010. 175-194, 183.

⁸¹ Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 184.

the "resonant, well-modulated voice"⁸², Job is aware that gods are only as strong as the faith of the worshiper.⁸³ If at first, God seems to have Job under his almighty thumb, Job ends up questioning the righteousness of God's actions. Job's incisive reaction removes him from the traditional *schlemiel* lineage and stands for Woody Allen's general skeptical attitude toward organized religions and the image of God they promote. Through the reinvention of the biblical parables in "The Scrolls", Woody Allen stirs a provocative debate over faith, religion, power, and justice.

Woody Allen's main characters often struggle with God, searching for him, contesting his existence, vindicating their agnosticism, or attempting to understand God's ways to man. Confined to bed because of a domestic accident which lines him up with the image of the *schlimazel*, the narrator of "My Philosophy" ventures into creating his own philosophical doctrine, which challenges the notion of divine power. Allen reinforces his opinion on the matter by trivialization through comic misattribution and parody: "The causal relationship between the first principle (i.e., God, or a strong wind) and any teleological concept of being (Being) is, according to Pascal, 'so ludicrous that it's not even funny (Funny).'"⁸⁴ The misfortunes of the individual, corresponding to the classical ill luck of the *schlemiel*, are also attributed to God. In "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar" Woody Allen

⁸² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 36.

⁸³ The section of "The Scrolls" telling Job's story was included in the anthology edited by Père Jean-Michel di Falco, entitled "Conversation avec Dieu. De St. Augustin à Woody Allen," which testifies for its relevance to the discussion of man's relationship with God. Woody Allen's text is part of the chapter entitled "Ténèbre." See Jean-Michel di Falco (ed.) *Conversation avec Dieu. De St. Augustine à Woody Allen*. Paris: Ramsay, 1995, 309-310.

⁸⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 171.

writes: "Man does not bring on his own unhappiness, and suffering is really God's will, although why He gets such a kick out of it is beyond me."⁸⁵

The typical protagonist of Woody Allen's short stories strives to survive in anguished doubt, ceaselessly bemoaning his essentially loveless condition and mortality, which make everything meaningless in a de-centered, potentially godless world. When the narrator of "Retribution" describes himself as "cautious, guilt-ridden, worrier-victim that I am"⁸⁶, he captures the essence of the entire panoply of main characters and narrators in Woody Allen's short fiction as they carry on vacillating between the need to find meaning and the incapability of adjusting to the small challenges of quotidian life. For example, in "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" Woody Allen writes: "Still obsessed by thoughts of death, I brood constantly. I keep wondering if there is an afterlife, and if there is will they be able to break a twenty?"⁸⁷ Here, the foibles and frailties of the 'Allen self' are most visible. The narrator's psychological misbalance is connected with his physical impairment and the thought of death is equated with the inconvenience of running out of napkins:

I believe my consumption has grown worse. Also my asthma. The wheezing comes and goes, and I get dizzy more and more frequently. I have taken to violent choking and fainting. My room is damp and I have perpetual chills and palpitations of the heart. I noticed, too, that I am out of napkins. Will it never stop?⁸⁸

Written as a pastiche of a writer's private journal, the text is a collage of scattered lamentations about death, romantic

⁸⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 210-11.

⁸⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 450.

⁸⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 8.

⁸⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 7.

relationships, and family ties, interrupted by ideas for plays and stories and possible scenarios for suicide. The narrator's voice is that of the neurotic, the misfit, incapable of controlling the immediate reality and of mastering social interactions. Even committing suicide becomes a task beyond his capabilities: "Once again I tried committing suicide-this time by wetting my nose and inserting it into the light socket. Unfortunately, there was a short in the wiring, and I merely caromed off the icebox."⁸⁹

The Yiddish tradition portrays the *schlemiel* as haunted by ill luck and unwittingly causing his own misfortunes. Woody Allen's main characters are often the architects of their own miserable conditions. Although there is no premeditation to their unhappiness and misery, their very nature, translated into the incapability to accept mortality and adjust to what they perceive as a meaningless existence, convicts them to alienation and everlasting psychological turmoil. Thus, they contribute to their failure by becoming the slaves of their own existential obsessions, which confine them to a vicious circle ("The Lunatic's Tale") or prevent them from having a regular family life ("No Kaddish for Weinstein").

When in the same perimeter with the macho type, Woody Allen's *schlemiel* is, unsurprisingly, physically aggressed. This type of situation is well illustrated in "A Twenties Memory", where the dynamics of the relationship between the narrator and Ernest Hemingway revolves around unidirectional punches. Woody Allen writes: "I kidded Hemingway about his forthcoming novel and we laughed a lot and had fun and then we put on some boxing gloves and he broke my nose"⁹⁰. The broken nose becomes a

⁸⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 8.

⁹⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 233.

leitmotif of their encounters, and reappears later in the story: "I kidded him about his new beard and we laughed and sipped cognac and then we put on some boxing gloves and he broke my nose"⁹¹. The superficial textual level tells a typical story of a *schlemiel* who unwittingly orchestrates his misfortune. Nonetheless, these scenes invite more careful consideration; they tackle the confrontation between Ernest Hemingway, the author who codified prowess as the essence of American maleness, and the anti-hero, the weakling, who embodies the greatest fear of the macho hero: impotence, both as sexual dysfunction and as powerlessness. The breaking of the nose is also rich in connotations. The nose is endowed with synecdochical value and refers to a Jewish stereotypical physical trait. The Jewish nose was used by the Nazi propaganda to tell Jews from Gentiles. Thus, the recurrent breaking of the nose also exposes Hemingway's discriminatory attitude toward Jews, as it appears in *The Sun Also Rises*.

Woody Allen's short stories also feature more innovative variations on the *schlemiel*/ *schlimazel* figure. He takes some of the most frightening characters in literature and turns them into clumsy, luckless, physically weak, and ineffectual *schlemiels*. For example, the most famous vampire of all time, the frightening, blood-thirsty Count Dracula is transformed into a comically doomed character, into the luckless *schlemiel*, by being placed in a situation that goes comically awry. Count Dracula brings incredible misfortune upon himself by mistaking a solar eclipse for night. He goes out for dinner at the baker's house, but, when he realizes what a fatal mistake he had made, Count Dracula panics, starts acting erratically, and tries to escape his host's hospitality by coming up with the funniest excuses. Woody Allen writes:

⁹¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 235.

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"Come. Sit down. We'll have a drink."

"Drink? No, I must run. Er – you're stepping on my cape."

"Sure. Relax. Some wine."

"Wine? Oh no, gave it up-liver and all that, you know. And now I really must buzz off. I just remembered, I left the lights on at my castle-bills'll be enormous . . ."

"Please," the baker says, his arm around the Count in firm friendship. "You're not intruding. Don't be so polite. So you're early."

"Really, I'd like to stay but there's a meeting of old Roumanian Counts across town and I'm responsible for the cold cuts."

"Rush, rush, rush. It's a wonder you don't get a heart attack."⁹²

In his attempt to avoid his archenemy, the sun, Count Dracula ends up in the closet and behaves like a spoiled child who continuously refuses to get out, despite everyone's insistence. Understandably, not even the arrival of the mayor can get him out. The Count's desperate struggle for survival is perceived by everyone as an amusing extravagance. The story has a tragic ending for the Count. As the mayor could no longer put up with the Count's whimsical behavior, he opened the door of the closet and exposed the vampire to the sun. Those were the last moments of Count Dracula, who turned into ashes, leaving the other characters startled. By means of boisterous comedy, Woody Allen transforms a much-feared vampire into the town fool. Apparently, this is the sole objective of the short story since the author does not put much effort into reproducing an accurate Transylvanian village atmosphere. Woody Allen uses Count Dracula as a ready-made character and places his stake on the reader's ability to fill the gaps.

Slapstick humor and zany comedy also turned Death into a *schlemiel*. "Death Knocks" is a short one-act play in which Death

⁹² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 241.

comes to get Nat Ackerman. The text can be read as a postmodernist parodical engagement with Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. In "Death Knocks", the gravitas of Bergman's Death is replaced by clumsiness and gaucherie. Thus, Death fails to make the dramatic entrance typically expected in such a crucial moment. Death confessed to Nat Ackerman:

DEATH: I climbed up the drainpipe. I was trying to make a dramatic entrance. I see the big windows and you're awake reading. I figure it's worth a shot. I'll climb up and enter with a little-you know ... (*Snaps fingers*) Meanwhile, I get my heel caught on some vines, the drainpipe breaks, and I'm hanging by a thread. Then my cape begins to tear. Look, let's just go. It's been a rough night.⁹³

The knight in *The Seventh Seal* lured death into a game of chess, as in Albertus Pictor's painting, and took the opportunity to ask existential questions. Although the search for answers about life, death, and God is the main preoccupation of Woody Allen's protagonists, it appears that a direct confrontation with Death makes Nat Ackerman focus his entire energy on gaining more time, so he leaves aside all existential concerns. After making it clear that he is not prepared to die, Nat Ackerman convinces Death to accept a bargain and decide over a game of cards whether Ackerman gets one more day among the living. As expected, he wins the game and Death has to grant him more time. Nat Ackerman is distrustful of the entire affair, mainly because of Death's *schlemielish* behavior. Both Death's frantic behavior and Nat Ackerman's suspicious attitude turn what should have been the last moments of Nat's life into situational comedy. By personifying Death as an ungainly, easy-to-fool character, the

⁹³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 187.

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author considerably belittles the magnitude of the last moments in one's life and diminishes the anxiety that the thought of dying usually causes in his characters. By confining the fear of death to a protected comic realm, Woody Allen renders it more manageable.

The *schlemielish* attitude of Woody Allen's characters is often meant to expose the shortcomings of contemporary society. His favorite fictional mechanism for social criticism is to create a *schlemiel* character that is to fall victim to a series of misfortunes, beginning with the troubles and disasters he brings upon himself, the unfortunate circumstances of fate, and continuing with the trickery and sham schemes of others. These scenarios are more common in his more recent short stories, collected in *Mere Anarchy*. If the texts written until the 1980s and collected in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen* generally focus on the metaphysical dimension of failure, the stories in *Mere Anarchy* feature individuals desperately trying to survive in a frantic New York. The 'Allen self' no longer complains about the bitterness of transcendental delusion but is most often presented as the subject of earthly deceit and fraudulence.

In "Sam, You Made the Pants Too Fragrant", the narrator, Benno Duckworth, a poetry editor, runs into a former coworker, Reg Milliepede, who advises him about the latest fashion trends and insists that he should refresh his wardrobe. Following Milliepede's recommendations, Duckworth pays a visit to Bandersnatch and Bushelman British tailoring company, a fashion house that makes clothes using "postmodern fabrics"⁹⁴. By the end of the short story, the high-tech suits business turns out to be a con. Mr. Duckworth, vain and gullible at the beginning of the short story, smells the danger, flees the scene, and learns a valuable

⁹⁴ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 29.

lesson about snobbery. The story ends with the moralizing conclusions of a man who was about to become a literal fashion victim:

Let him try and find me. High voltage in a pair of pants is exactly the kind of thing that sends me ricocheting directly to Barneys, where I bought a marked-down three button job off the peg, and it doesn't do anything postmodern unless you count picking up lint.⁹⁵

For this short story, Woody Allen drew inspiration from "The Year in Ideas; Enhanced Clothing," an article published by Ginia Bellafante on December 15, 2002, in *The New York Times*. Woody Allen made a jest of technologically-enabled fabrics and grasped the opportunity to express his skepticism regarding the excessive and reckless practices of contemporary consumerist society.

As Isabel Ermida argues, the short stories in *Mere Anarchy* can be read as "variations on failure"⁹⁶. Most texts are designed around people with high artistic aspirations, be they writers ("This Nib for Hire", "Glory Hallelujah, Sold"), actors ("Tandoori Ransom"), movie-makers ("Calisthenics, Poison Ivy, Final Cut"), or composers ("Attention Geniuses: Cash Only"). All of them have their hopes and illusions crushed and fail to adjust to contemporary society, bereft of any trace of humanism and completely lacking a solid hierarchy of values. Nonetheless, the tragic dimension of their sad experiences is attenuated by the comic tone of the stories and by the moralizing endings. The experiences recounted in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy* are symbolic of the betrayals of modern life and are meant to demonstrate how rotten contemporary society can be.

⁹⁵ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 34.

⁹⁶ Ermida, "Losers", 335.

Nonetheless, the variations on the figure of the *schlemiel* contribute greatly to softening the harshness of the reality he presents. As Sanford Pinsker points out, "the very charm of the Yiddish *schlemiel* depends on his ability to absorb defeat with equal measure of humorous acceptance and bittersweet disappointment"⁹⁷.

The importance of Woody Allen's contribution to the American cultural landscape through the use and remodeling of the *schlemiel* figure has become visible since the beginning of his career. As Sanford Pinsker noted in his 1971 book,

while I don't count Allen among our philosophers or significant social critics, I do think that his genius for parody and the systematic care and feeding he has given to his *schlemielish* persona are important additions to our cultural scene.⁹⁸

Pinsker's book was published at a time when Woody Allen's artistic and writerly crafts were still immature, when his philosophy was not as articulate as it is today and his skills for social criticism were not as evolved as they prove to be in the short stories collected in *Mere Anarchy*. In a more recent book on Woody Allen's films, another of his exegetes, Sam B. Girgus underlines the social relevance of Allen's work and speaks about the social impetus behind his use of the *schlemiel* in constructing the persona which became the hallmark of his entire work. In Girgus' words,

In a time of democratic upheaval that touched all aspects of life from the sexual and social to the cultural and political, Allen's looks and offbeat style seemed to speak for and represent the involvement of Everyman in the transformations of life-styles and values. His persona as a loser, the classic underdog *schlemiel* figure, was perfect for a period of participatory democracy and

⁹⁷ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 130.

⁹⁸ Pinsker, *The Schlemiel*, 166.

confusing change, but also allowed for a process of distancing from developments and events that contained frightening potential within them. One could look at and listen to Woody Allen and identify with him, while also feeling somewhat estranged from him.⁹⁹

Undoubtedly, Woody Allen's work has brought a remarkable contribution to the evolution of the figure of the *schlemiel*. The use of this character goes beyond gratuitous experimentation with a Jewish traditional folk figure that was gaining popularity at the time he began his career. While the traditional *schlemiel* of Jewish folk tales and anecdotes is blissfully ignorant of his own limitations, in the case of Woody Allen's characters, it is their rationality, their knowledge about the world, and their acute self-awareness that cause their misfortunes. Woody Allen's *schlemiel* translates each misfortune into a comical, self-deprecating account through gestures and insights that combine *schlemielhood* with admirable astuteness and penetrating intelligence. As seen above, Woody Allen uses the *schlemiel* figure to explore both metaphysical and social, quotidian aspects of existence. The cultural legacy and the richness of connotations associated with this stereotype make Woody Allen's task easier when he tries to avoid pathos and present the predicaments of his character's lives in a lighter, comic manner.

Often, Woody Allen reworks the experiences of the *schlemiel* hero through strategies of the absurd. He enriches the stereotype of the *schlemiel* by adding what he borrows from Camus' absurd man. As Mark S. Reisch noted, Woody Allen's persona "frequently assumes an intellectual pose. They are schlemiels who are unable to communicate; they are fraught with self-doubt, but they triumph through absurd creation"¹⁰⁰. Thus, the endless concern

⁹⁹ Girgus, *The Films*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Reisch, "Woody Allen", 72.

with the aimlessness and the absurdity of the world becomes the mark of Woody Allen's *schlemiels*.¹⁰¹ Allen's *schlemiel* is the intellectual, the philosopher, defined by his existential jeremiad, by the struggle with his neurotic, obsessive existential doubt, overwhelmed by angst and by the absurdity of the outer world. His alienation comes from his refusal, or even incapability to surrender to the burdens of existence. At times, the gnawing angst and assorted existential concerns are replaced by equally tormenting worldly affairs which point to the individual's alienation and his inability to cope with a degraded, corrupt society. When confronted with existential concerns, there is no way Woody Allen's characters can escape the thrall of biological determinism, which renders everything meaningless; on the contrary, they surrender to anxiety and doubt. On the other hand, they are able to survive social failure, although their mechanisms of coping are only variations of surrender. Rather than confront and try to control a distressing situation, they give up and run away. Regardless of the nature of their problems, Woody Allen's characters always seem to be inherently incompatible with the reality they find themselves in. Always presented through the main character's perspective, this reality is, of course, absurd.

3.4. The legacy of Jewish humor

In one of the best-known scenes from *Annie Hall* (1977), Alvy Singer tells his friend Rob: "You know, I was having lunch with some guys from NBC, so I said . . . uh, 'Did you eat yet or what?,' and Tom Christie said, 'No, didchoo?' Not, did you, didchoo eat?"

¹⁰¹ Reisch, "Woody Allen", 73.

Jew? No, not did you eat, but Jew eat? Jew. You get it? Jew eat?" Alvy's insistence on the punning conversational contraction of "did you" makes the scene humorous. The source of the comic effect, however, is not just the phonetic pun and its repetition; it also stems from the exposing of a stereotypically Jewish trait, often exploited by Jewish jokes: the predisposition to self-victimization. Moreover, Alvy's paranoid insistence, revealing his oversensitivity to ethnic discrimination, casts a shade of bitterness over the entire scene—yet another feature of Jewish humor. Like many other scenes from Woody Allen's films that exploit the potential of Jewish humor, this conversation between Alvy and Rob has often been discussed by critics.¹⁰² By contrast, the strategies used by Woody Allen to incorporate the Jewish humorous tradition into his short fiction have received little critical attention.

Although Allen's short fiction has not benefited from as much scholarly attention as his films, the humorous quality of his short stories and casual pieces has attracted several scholars who have investigated Allen's penchant for absurdity, his deployment of non sequiturs, his use of the Little Man as a comic vehicle, and the linguistic dimensions of his joke scripts. Drawing on analyses of the main characteristics of Jewish humor, this section adds to the scholarship by exploring the influence of the Jewish comic tradition on Woody Allen's short fiction. The strategies and the ethos of Jewish humor represent a definitive element of Woody Allen's comic power. Therefore, exploring the ways in which he chooses to rework them in his prose provides a significant insight into his unique brand of humor.

¹⁰² See, for example, Am B. Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen*, 51; Sander H. Lee, *Eighteen Woody Allen Films Analyzed: Anguish, God and Existentialism*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002, 71; David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004, 78.

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Cultural approaches to humor oscillate between two major standpoints, presenting it either as a culturally determined category or as transhistorical and transcultural. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new category in the field of humor studies was established, namely Jewish humor, through the work of Sigmund Freud, who closely analyzed Jewish jokes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). The complexity of Jewish humor and questions pertaining to its origins, persistence, evolution, scope, and dominance have continued to attract numerous scholars, mostly because Jewish humor has become visible in American Studies and better known to the general public. According to Mark Shechner, Jewish humor gained notoriety outside the community once "it hit the New World." Jewish humor crossed the ocean with the Eastern European Ashkenazi immigrants and was embedded in "a tradition of storytelling, a treasury of folk sayings and anecdotes, and an astringent wit that needed only the opportunity and staging grounds to become as American as the bagel nosh."¹⁰³ However, the mild accents of the loving satire of the European Jewish Enlightenment assumed a sardonic note on American soil. As Shechner puts it, "unlike the traditional 'Gevalt' joke, or the humor of Sholem Aleichem, this is now American comedy: a comedy of deflation, anti-profundity, of Sophocles strangled, of Nietzsche on his knees."¹⁰⁴ There are, of course, also voices that denigrate the transformation of Jewish humor in the New World.¹⁰⁵ This change

¹⁰³ Mark Shechner, "Comedy." *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Popular Culture*. Eds. Jack R Fischel and Susan M. Ortmann. Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 2009. 70-74, 71-72.

¹⁰⁴ Shechner, "Comedy," 73.

¹⁰⁵ Irving Howe, "The Nature of Jewish Laughter." *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987. 16-24, 24.

was, however, inevitable once the realities of the European shtetl, which used to provide the material for Jewish jokes, have been replaced by the experiences of American urbanity.

Indeed, as Jewish humor adjusted itself to accommodate new American realities, it also influenced the evolution of mainstream culture. At first, the marginalized condition of Jews who settled in America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century turned them into the butt of the jokes of the dominant population.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Jewish humor flourished on American soil, and in the early 1920s, when Jewish comedians entered mainstream American entertainment, it began to exert an influence on American letters and entertainment.¹⁰⁷ If at the beginning of the twentieth century Jewish comedians "did not make their ethnic identity paramount" and used Yiddish "as the familiar deflator of the exotic," without resorting to Jewish comic traditions, by the mid-twentieth century the American stage began to see comedians who acknowledged their heritage and used it more assertively.¹⁰⁸ By 1975, eighty percent of the most renowned American comedians were Jews, evidence that Jewish humor enjoyed an ascending trend in America.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Varieties of Jewish Humor." *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987. 1-15,6.

¹⁰⁷ Shechner, "Comedy," 70.

¹⁰⁸ Cohen, "Varieties", 8.

¹⁰⁹ Avner Ziv, "Preface." *Semites and Stereotypes. Characteristics of Jewish Humor*. Eds. Anat Zajdman and Avner Ziv. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1993. vii – xii, viii. See the study published by S. S. Janus in 1975 and quoted by Avner Ziv. See also Stephen J. Whitfield. "Towards an Appreciation of American Jewish Humor." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4.1 (2005): 33–48, 33–34.

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In addition to becoming a part of popular art and entertainment, Jewish humor also made its way into highbrow literature. The comic and satiric writing of Ben Hecht and Nathanael West paved the way for what would become the golden era of Jewish humor in American letters, the second half of the twentieth century. The practice of using Jewish humor and incorporating Jewish jests into literary works dates back to Yiddish literature. The best Yiddish writers, Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916), Isaac Leib Peretz (1852–1915), and Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835 or 1836–1917), all used the comic strategies of folk tales and anecdotes in their writing.¹¹⁰ In the same vein, writers such as Bernard Malamud, Bruce Jay Friedman, Grace Paley, Stanley Elkin, and Philip Roth have exploited the generosity of the Jewish humorous tradition. Their work has had considerable impact on American literature; they have forever changed the dynamics between Jewish cultural specificity and mainstream American experience by gaining highbrow respect for the Jewish culture and for the tradition of Jewish humor. As Robert Alter argues, Jewish humor has strongly influenced the work of Jewish and Jewish-American writers and differentiates it from what Alter calls “the mythology of suffering” promoted by the Hellenistic literary tradition and defined by such paradigmatic tragic characters as Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Goethe’s Werther, Dostoevsky’s Dimitri

¹¹⁰ Sholem Aleichem is author, most famously, of *Tevye the Dairyman*, which inspired Joseph Stein’s famous musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Isaac Leib Peretz wrote poetry and stories that rely heavily on folklore: “Der Khelmer Melamed” (“The Teacher from Chelm”), “Yankl Pesimist” (“Jacob the Pessimist”), and “Ha-Kaddish” (“The Kaddish”). Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, often referred to as Mendele Moycher Sforim, wrote *Dos Kleyne Mentshele* (*The Little Man*) and *Dos Vintshfingerl* (*The Wishing Ring*).

Karamazov, and Camus's *Stranger*.¹¹¹ According to Alter, writers who are influenced by their Jewish cultural legacy use "the wryness and homey realism of Jewish humor to suggest that a less melodramatic, less apocalyptic perspective than that of myth might be appropriate for viewing even the disquieting state of affairs of the modern world."¹¹² This tendency to tame sorrow and fashion a more bearable reality is deeply rooted in the Jewish humorous tradition and has served as a survival mechanism for ages.

While it is clear that Jewish humor has its own specificity, easily recognizable by both Jews and Gentiles, it is still difficult to identify the definitive features of Jewish humor and to come up with an all-encompassing description. Nevertheless, scholars and theorists who have undertaken this complex task have identified a series of characteristics that have been preserved and cultivated by the Jewish humorous tradition. Most scholars seem to agree that the self-critical and self-disparaging character of Jewish humor is its essential and definitive trait. This characteristic is, of course, to be found in other humorous traditions, but, according to Sigmund Freud, the extent of self-criticism and self-derogation manifested by Jewish humor is not matched by other traditions.¹¹³ Freud claims that the strategy of self-deprecation used by Jewish raconteurs reveals their own misfortunes and personality flaws without, however, denigrating Jewish law or the Jewish way of life. Freud's contention that self-deprecation is the fundamental

¹¹¹ Robert Alter, "Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth." *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987. 25-36, 26.

¹¹² Alter, "Jewish Humor," 27.

¹¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960. 111-13.

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characteristic of Jewish humor has become axiomatic and has been endorsed by the majority of scholars engaged in the study of it.¹¹⁴ Theodore Reik furthers Freud's argument by attributing the distinctive characteristics of Jewish humor to the cultural duality of the Jews, stemming from the dialectic between the agony of persecution and the joy of chosenness. Reik ties Jewish humor to what he sees as the continuous vacillation between "masochistic self-humiliation and paranoid superiority feeling"¹¹⁵ in the historical and theological evolution of the Jewish people. Thus, Jewish humor can be understood as a retaliation strategy against oppressors, a self-defense mechanism that often conceals hostility.¹¹⁶ Christie Davies, who also analyzes the self-oriented character of Jewish humor and explores self-derogation as specific to ethnic minority humor, argues that members of minority groups (Jews, Irish, Scots, African Americans) often enjoy jokes at the expense of their ethnic group, but tend to use the appearance of self-deprecation against the dominant group as well. The repertoire of Jewish humor is fairly rich in anecdotes that portray Gentiles as lacking mental agility. As Davies points out, jokes that "poke fun at the faith of the Christians, including its most sacred mysteries, celebrate Jewish brain-power and success in business, the professions, and intellectual life."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ There are, of course, objections to this thesis. Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos, for example, rejects Freud's claim. In his analysis of Jewish American comedians, Ben-Amos argues that Freud's theory that Jews are predisposed to self-deprecation has been taken for granted and lacks substantiation. See Dan Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* 32.2 (1973): 112-31.

¹¹⁵ Theodor Reik, *Jewish Wit*. New York: Gamut Press, 1962, 233.

¹¹⁶ Reik, *Jewish Wit*, 233.

¹¹⁷ Christie Davies, "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor." *Semites and Stereotypes. Characteristics of Jewish Humor*. Eds.

According to Stephen J. Whitfield, through this penchant for self-derogation and self-victimization, Jewish humor has influenced the evolution of American humor. Jewish humor, Whitfield argues, helped American humor supersede “the ribaldry of the nineteenth century” by replacing cruelty and violence as sources of the comic effect with an ethos of failure, vulnerability, and self-belittlement.¹¹⁸ In Whitfield’s view, self-disparagement—which can lead to self-hatred—is the result of a psychological strategy that redirects feelings of anger and hostility away from the dominant majority and channels them toward oneself and one’s community.¹¹⁹ Besides self-orientation, Whitfield discusses the characteristics of Jewish humor in connection with Jewish stereotypes and core values: avarice, entrepreneurial energy and shrewdness, mental agility, deep appreciation for education and intellectual achievement, a “certain indifference to practicality,” physical weakness, and family conflicts.¹²⁰

Another fundamental characteristic associated with Jewish humor is its manifestation as laughter through tears, a type of bitter humor garroted by anguish that serves as emotional relief and reflects the deep contradictions of the Jewish experience as the chosen yet persecuted people. Jewish humor serves as an emotional defense mechanism that assists the refusal to surrender to the adversity of life. By laughing at the predicaments of existence, Jews were able to fashion a bearable reality. As Sarah Blacher Cohen explains, Jewish humor “has also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews

Anat Zajdman and Avner Ziv. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1993. 29-46, 34.

¹¹⁸ Whitfield, “Towards an Appreciation,” 39-41.

¹¹⁹ Whitfield, “Towards an Appreciation,” 43.

¹²⁰ Whitfield, “Towards an Appreciation,” 35-37, 35.

have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness."¹²¹ Actions and events are not inherently funny; rather, it is the way the individual chooses to perceive and describe them that creates humor. Laughing at one's own misfortunes and adopting a comic approach to the adversity of life can be one of the most efficient survival mechanisms. Laughter becomes a form of retaliation and relief.

Self-criticism and bittersweetness are the most commonly discussed traits of Jewish humor. To these characteristics, Judith Stora-Sandor adds a closer analysis of the manifestations of Jewish humor in literature and identifies a series of thematic and stylistic markers. She connects the bittersweetness of Jewish humor with a general predisposition of Jewish anecdotes and jokes to take unfortunate situations as their subject. This propensity manifests in the use of characters that embody different variants of the *schlemiel*/ *schlimazel* stereotypes as the protagonists of jokes. Narratives of failure represent an essential characteristic of these character types. Besides the predisposition for unfortunate situations, Stora-Sandor claims that Jewish humorous literature exhibits an inclination for exploring maladies, morbidity, and death, which are often associated with Jewishness. She also tackles the self-orientation of Jewish jokes and the expression of deep inadequacy typical of Jewish humorous literature. As outsiders, Jews have the distance and lucidity indispensable for satire and irony, qualities that are visible in the aggressive underlayer of Jewish humor and in the false naïveté of self-deprecation. Another dominant trait identified by Stora-Sandor is the exuberant, hyperbolic imagination that Jewish characters display in their

¹²¹ Cohen, "Varieties," 4.

exploration of catastrophic outcomes and worst-case scenarios.¹²² She also argues that the predilection of Jewish writers for monologues and narratives centered on one main character allows them to explore the most intimate preoccupations and dilemmas of life. Characters predisposed toward interrogation and speculation manifest roots in Talmudic discussions transmitted through generations. Finally, Stora-Sandor claims that Jewish writing can be characterized as a "writing of uncertainty," using phrases that comment on or contradict each other, and she observes that Jewish humorous literature often blends the different linguistic registers of Biblical sacred text and Talmudic vernacular, as well as Hebrew or Yiddish words.¹²³ The blend creates a close association between the sacred and the profane, between "the sublime and the mundane," which has become typical of Jewish literary productions. In Stora-Sandor's words,

Even if on a stylistic level, this blend of sacred and secular texts does not always occur, the mixture of the sublime and the mundane is a phenomenon found in all Jewish literature. [. . .] On a literary level, the amalgam between the most elevated and the most trivial, as it happens in style or in the realm of ideas, is an excellent humorous device and the Jews use it as they please.¹²⁴

¹²² Stora-Sandor, *L'humour juif dans la littérature: De Job à Woody Allen*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984, 255-73.

¹²³ Stora-Sandor, *L'humour juif*, 282-85; 284; my translation of "l'écriture de l'incertitude."

¹²⁴ Stora-Sandor, *L'humour juif*, 290-91; 291. My translation. In the original: «Même si sur le plan stylistique ce mélange de textes sacrés et profanes ne se réalise pas toujours, le mélange du sublime et du quotidien est un phénomène que l'on retrouve dans toute la littérature juive. . . . Sur le plan littéraire, l'amalgame du plus élevé avec le plus trivial, que cela se passe au niveau du style ou dans le domaine des idées, est un excellent procédé humoristique et les Juifs le pratiquent volontiers».

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The thematic predispositions, coupled with the stylistic devices analyzed by Stora-Sandor, form a common underlayer reworked and remodeled by writers of Jewish origin to facilitate the exploration of their own literary concerns. Even if Allen is reluctant to acknowledge the influence of his Jewish upbringing and background on his writing,¹²⁵ the characteristics of Jewish humor discussed above can be easily identified in his short fiction. His approach to comic writing is, indeed, complex and borrows from the conventions of stand-up comedy and from the comic storytelling tradition established by the most influential comic writers of *The New Yorker*. However, Allen's fiction always exploits the particularities of Jewish humor, either making it central to the plot or using it as an ancillary strategy of the humorous effect. The interplay of these three major influences – stand-up comedy, *New Yorker* humor, and Jewish humor – makes much of the brand of Woody Allen's humor.

Allen's main characters draw from the stereotype of the *schlemiel*, a comic character belonging to the Jewish tradition and characterized by fallibility and inadequacy, discussed in the previous sub-chapter. A central figure of the *shtetl* oral tradition, the *schlemiel* is the most common vehicle for Jewish humor. Its features lend themselves easily to the strategies of self-derogation and self-ridicule by which Woody Allen's short fiction performs a densely comic exploration of the existential concerns that trouble the neurotic urban self. Allen exposes the existential musings and the inner turmoil of his main characters through self-satire and self-ironic remarks as if attempting to allay their nightmarish reveries through humor.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Allen's interview by Michiko Kakutani: "Woody Allen: The Art of Humor No. 1," *Paris Review*, no. 136 (1995): 200–222; 200.

The narrator of "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" uses self-deprecatory resignation to tackle a series of concerns, ranging from family issues and romantic relationships to irresolvable metaphysical contradictions and useless attempts to fight existential emptiness. Allen builds the entire story on surprising associations that he reworks by means of strategies of excess. He exploits the benefits of these strategies and often juxtaposes the grotesque and the comical. As is the case with most of Allen's texts, philosophical concerns revolving around the assiduous quest for meaning as a governing principle are simultaneously treated here as dilemmas and jokes: "Do I believe in God? I did until Mother's accident. She fell on some meat loaf, and it penetrated her spleen. She lay in a coma for months, unable to do anything but sing 'Granada' to an imaginary herring."¹²⁶ What begins as lofty speculation regarding God's existence is abruptly deflated by association with trivial matters. Great metaphysical problems surrender to the urgency of mundane difficulties, and the anguish that springs from living in a godless universe is exceeded by domestic misfortunes. Allen's anticlimactic design encompasses the interplay between the tragic and the surreal and makes tragedy the subject of comedy. The life-threatening accident is imaginatively distorted, and the entire scene gains farcical accents. The topos of morbidity, to which the Jewish humorous imagination is disposed, is explored not only in this short episode but throughout. The despair and nightmares of the narrator are fueled by consumption, asthma, chills, and palpitations, be they real or imagined. However, the gravity of health problems is always downplayed through similar strategies of deflation, based

¹²⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 10.

on non sequiturs that counter anxiety as they veer toward the commonplace, the mundane, or the grotesque.

The structure of the text dissipates into a random sequence of causally unrelated episodes, and these interlaced fragments of quotidian life enable reflections on a wide range of metaphysical concerns and anxieties. Each paragraph is built on discordant and incongruous associations, which often slide toward the style of stand-up comedy, transforming neuroses, metaphysical angst, and assorted concerns into the butt of jokes:

Today I saw a red-and-yellow sunset and thought, How insignificant I am! Of course, I thought that yesterday, too, and it rained. I was overcome with self-loathing and contemplated suicide again – this time by inhaling next to an insurance salesman.¹²⁷

Self-belittlement begins here as a serious existentialist meditation on human insignificance and the intrinsic meaninglessness of life but is immediately undercut by both the laying bare of the clichéd contemplation of sunset and the punch line explaining the method of suicide. Self-loathing evolves into a mechanism of attack, ending by exposing the unsympathetic nature of another stereotype, the insurance salesman, a nagging reminder of impending misfortunes, catastrophes, and death.

Family matters benefit from a similar comic-dramatic-grotesque treatment. The narrator describes his encounter with his brother in a manner that pokes fun at himself, his family, and family relationships. Woody Allen writes:

I ran into my brother today at a funeral. We had not seen one another for fifteen years, but as usual he produced a pig bladder from his pocket and began hitting me on the head with it. Time has helped me understand him better. I finally realized his remark that

¹²⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 9.

I am "some loathsome vermin fit only for extermination" was said more out of compassion than anger. Let's face it: he was always much brighter than me – wittier, more cultured, better educated. Why he is still working at McDonald's is a mystery.¹²⁸

While the narrator makes himself the main target of ridicule, the mockery carries an ethnic code and brings along ethnic and religious allusions. The narrator, an aspiring writer, belittles himself by admitting to being less educated and less cultured than a physically aggressive, brutish brother who works at McDonald's. The family reunion is ironically celebrated with a beating and a hurl of insults that enact the Jewish strategic redirection of anger and hostility toward oneself and one's own. Moreover, the aggressor uses the bladder of a pig, one of the most repellant body parts of the animal considered impure by *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws. Subsequent references to family relationships assume a paratextual role when Allen explains the title of his short story collection *Without Feathers*. The explanation starts with an inter-textual reference and ends in anticlimax through a comic-grotesque literalization of metaphor that testifies to the Jewish interest in morbidity, channeled here toward the grotesque body: "How wrong Emily Dickinson was! Hope is not 'the thing with feathers.' The thing with feathers has turned out to be my nephew. I must take him to a specialist in Zurich."¹²⁹ Arguably, the text is still humorous even if read outside the ethnic code. Moreover, other comic traditions can assist the analysis. For example, first-person narrative is the definitive form of stand-up comedy, and self-disparagement is commonplace in stand-up routines. As Chirico explains, "putting oneself at a disadvantage helps the

¹²⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 8.

¹²⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 9.

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audience feel superior and thus more attracted to a comedian who can laugh at himself."¹³⁰ The interior monologue can also be linked to *The New Yorker's* generic preference for comic storytelling, and the neurotic narrator can be seen as an avatar of *The New Yorker's* Little Man.¹³¹ Nevertheless, reading the text through the lens of ethnicity adds nuances that augment the humorous effect.

Whenever dysfunctional relationships among the members of Jewish families come up in Woody Allen's short fiction, they constitute the plot of the most comic-dramatic scenes. These scenes are one way that Allen reworks the familiar stereotypes and the behavioral clichés of New World Jewishness: the neurotic weakling, the rabbi, the Jewish mother (in Allen's short stories, introduced as psychological terror rather than physical presence), the shrewish wife, the fabulous *shiksa* (Gentile temptress), and several other typologies pertaining to the Jewish American urban experience.

Marriage counts among the favorite targets of jokes, and it always presents the narrator in a posture of inferiority, ceaselessly lamenting his submission to the stereotypically domineering wife. This stereotype has a fairly long history in the Jewish humorous tradition, which seems to be extremely rich in jokes that cast the Jewish wife in an unflattering role. An illustrative representation of the husband-wife relationship and the unmaning effect the wife has on her male counterpart is depicted in the final scene of "To Err is Human – To Float, Divine". Caught in an existence where the only joy is opening the mail and finding out about the "power of crystals, holistic healing and psychic vibrations,"¹³² the

¹³⁰ Chirico, "Performed Authenticity," 26–27.

¹³¹ See Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 251–52; 258–59.

¹³² Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 3.

male narrator decides to look for higher planes of existence and join the Sublime Ascension Center run by Ms. Galaxie Sunstroke. When he returns home to his family, he starts levitating six inches from the floor, manifesting a contemptuous attitude toward his wife and all other lower-frequency people who cannot understand the complexity of the universe. The only problem is that, for some reason, he is no longer able to come down. Of course, the wife finds the most appropriate solution and the problem is solved as follows:

All the while I strained mightily to lower myself, grimacing and twisting like a mime. Finally, leaping into action, the better half took it upon herself to master this warp in conventional physics by procuring a neighbor's ski, which she brought down hard on the top of my head, sending me earth-bound in a thrice.¹³³

The wives in Woody Allen's short stories reinforce the general negative stereotype associated with Jewish women in literature and reflect the unfortunate fate of the fictional representations of Jewish women. In most cases, they are confined within the boundaries of a stereotype that only allows derogatory attributes; they are depicted as patronizing and tyrannical, frantic, and destructively over-possessive. The stereotypical negative characteristics of the Jewish woman tend to scare men away and this type of relational dynamics is fairly common in the work of Jewish-American writers. In most of Woody Allen's texts where there is a wife, there is also a much more attractive Gentile alternative, opening up infinite possibilities of intimate happiness. Just as in the case of Philip Roth, Woody Allen's male characters are very likely to run away from the image of the Jewish wife/mother. This reaction is often interpreted as an attempt to

¹³³ Allen, *Mere Anarchy*, 12.

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escape "the boundaries of ethnic identity and determination as embodied in Jewish women, only to find alienation and insecurity in the arms of a shikse."¹³⁴

The unhappy marriage and the overbearing wife set the background to the extraordinary metaleptic adventure in "The Kugelmass Episode". Kugelmass is unhappily married to a "troglodyte," Daphne, with whom he spends his evenings "moping around in their apartment."¹³⁵ There are hints at family conflicts beyond the failing marriage: "You should be more polite to Cousin Hamish—he likes you,"¹³⁶ Daphne tells him. Drawing on the stereotype of the controlling and manipulative Jewish wife, Allen represents Daphne as the defender of family and community values, while Kugelmass is portrayed as the stereotypical weak husband who ceaselessly tries to escape her. In this case, Kugelmass escapes in the arms of Flaubert's Emma Bovary, whom he repeatedly visits and transfers to his diegetic realm, with the help of Persky, the magician.

Kugelmass is a "bold Jew" whose very name derives from a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish dish, *kugel*, a baked pudding or casserole. Persky is also Jewish and even spices the text with Yiddish words: "It's the *emess*" ("truth"), Persky says to Kugelmass when trying to convince him of the reliability of his magic box¹³⁷. Yiddish words appear often in Allen's short fiction and bring the exoticism of difference to his writing style. Yiddish functions both

¹³⁴ Sam B. Girgus, "Philip Roth and Woody Allen Freud and the Humor of the Repressed." *Semites and Stereotypes. Characteristics of Jewish Humor*. Eds. Anat Zajdman and Avner Ziv. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1993. 121 – 130, 121.

¹³⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 348.

¹³⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 354.

¹³⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 349, 350, emphasis added.

as a comic device and as an identification marker that ties his stories to the Jewish tradition.

A descendant of the *schlemiel*, Kugelmass is aware that he cannot compete with other male seducers: "'Make sure and always get me into the book before page 120,' Kugelmass said to the magician one day. 'I always have to meet her before she hooks up with this Rodolphe character'"¹³⁸. On the other hand, when in the company of Emma Bovary, he sets himself up as a sophisticated man, able to spoil his mistress with the best things and entertainment that money can buy. Their luxurious romance ends abruptly; the situation gets out of control when, due to a malfunction of the magic box, Persky cannot send Emma Bovary back to her novel. Kugelmass finds himself stuck with a high-maintenance mistress and becomes aware of his inability to keep up the pretense: he cannot be this idealized version of himself for more than a weekend. He panics, starts behaving erratically, and even contemplates suicide. The main cause of his despair is financial. All of a sudden, he forgets everything about love, romance, courting, and gallantry and starts raving about the escalating costs of the entire affair:

Nuance, my foot. I'm pouring Dom Pérignon and black eggs into this little mouse, plus her wardrobe, plus she's enrolled at the Neighborhood Playhouse and suddenly needs professional photos. Also, Persky, Professor Fivish Kopkind, who teaches Comp Lit and who has always been jealous of me, has identified me as the sporadically appearing character in the Flaubert book. He's threatened to go to Daphne. I see ruin and alimony; jail. For adultery with Madame Bovary, my wife will reduce me to beggary.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 353.

¹³⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 358.

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Kugelmass's reaction recalls stereotypical Jewish avarice and flair for business. Emma Bovary begins to cost more than she is worth for Kugelmass and more than he can afford. The fascinating French lover becomes a costly "little mouse," and the allure of adulterous romance cracks under the pressure of mundane, pragmatic concerns. Kugelmass's dream of manliness is humorously crushed by his emotional weakness, psychological instability, and financial vulnerability. Thus, Kugelmass's comeuppance at the end of the story – he ends up being chased by the hairy and irregular verb *tener*, in a Spanish textbook – allows a nuanced interpretation, ranging from the idea that he is taken to task for his materialistic concerns to the theory that he is punished for misrepresenting himself as a financially potent beau. The situational humor of the story is supplemented by the humor of character and by the artful manipulation of literary conventions and erudite references, all endorsed by the ethnic code.

In Woody Allen's short fiction, the majority of jokes regarding marriage or adultery are directed at the male character, not at the wife, although, in the Jewish oral tradition, the woman is generally the target. The traditional Jewish marriage is more of a social institution than a romantic union between two individuals emotionally attached to each other. Since the institution of marriage is central to the life of the Jewish community, the choice of the partner cannot be left in the hands of the youth. Within the Jewish Orthodox community, the two spouses were usually brought together by means of recommendations from friends or family or from a professional matchmaker, the *shadchan*. Therefore, the transactional dimension of marriage turns it into an easy target for jokes, and the lack of romantic love as the center of the union also reflects in Woody Allen's short stories.

In Woody Allen's short fiction, the target range of self-mockery often stretches from individual characters to the entire ethnic group, with its traditions, mores, and customs. Ethnic self-ridicule reaches perfection in Allen's "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar," a collage of mock-parables exploring, reworking, and ridiculing the vernacular and architecture of Hasidic interpretation and teachings. In this text, Allen revisits and reinvents the ethnic experiential specificity associated with the Hasidic tradition in order to mock its essential aspects: religious practices, the image of the rabbi, the interpretation of rabbinic parables, *kashrut*, and God's relation with the chosen people. The six mock parables in Allen's collage follow the traditional structure of Hasidic parables: they begin with the *mashal* (a story fraught with dilemma) and continue with the *nimshal* (interpretation and commentary).¹⁴⁰ Each parable reads like an exaggerated excursion into the absurd and takes on the comic effects of the hyperbolic imagination. The unexpected turn of the Hasidic parable, which traditionally ends in insightful paradox or a completely different and much wiser approach to the subject, leads here to commentaries and interpretations that violate causal reasoning and thrive on disrupting religious thought with abrupt shifts toward the most pragmatic aspects of human existence.

The humorous underlayer of Allen's treatment of the parables reveals an insightful grasp of the Jewish condition. Allen explores the potential of humor for criticism by targeting both the ethnic group and the dominant majority. His satire attacks superficial hermeneutics, abstruse and preposterous rabbinic

¹⁴⁰ For the structure of Hasidic parables see Aryeh Wineman, *The Hasidic Parable*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 5761/2001, xv–xviii.

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advice, the absurdity of religious practices and restrictions, and the vanities and foibles of human nature. For example, one of the parables presents an incident in the life of Rabbi Zwi Chaim Yisroel, "an Orthodox scholar of the Torah and a man who developed whining to an art unheard of in the West."¹⁴¹ The most admired of the rabbi's skills is exaggerated because the text means both to criticize the Jewish propensity for self-victimization and disparage Jews as weaklings in a humorous fashion. The target of criticism is extended to encompass normative religion, religious hypocrisy, and even God: "Once, while he was on his way to synagogue to celebrate the sacred Jewish holiday commemorating God's reneging on every promise, a woman stopped him and asked the following question: 'Rabbi, why are we not allowed to eat pork?' 'We're *not*?' the Rev said incredulously. 'Uh-oh'"¹⁴².

Synagogue attendance is exposed as futile here through Allen's reference to a fictitious holiday celebrating God's unkept promises to his chosen people. This accusation adds bittersweet nuances to the otherwise comic discourse, as it alludes to the troubled history of the Jews. God is commonly held accountable for the traumata of the Jewish people in Woody Allen's short fiction, but this is also true in Hasidic Judaism.¹⁴³ That the rabbi replies with a question is not surprising; it reflects the tradition of Talmudic dialectics. However, the question itself, coming from a rabbi, *is* startling, and it is the catalyst of the comic effect. The rabbi's reaction to the woman's question reveals his unawareness of *kashrut* restrictions and comically deflates expectations as it

¹⁴¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 209.

¹⁴² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 209-10.

¹⁴³ See the next sub-chapter.

sabotages the architecture of Hasidic parables: the expected wise advice is replaced by the revelation of imposture.

Besides ethnic self-ridicule, "Hassidic Tales" also tackles the effects of the sense of ethnic superiority embedded in the Jewish jokes that target the dominant culture. For example, consider Rabbi Raditz of Poland: "a very short rabbi with a long beard, who was said to have inspired many pogroms with his sense of humor"¹⁴⁴. This description nests a sarcastic protest against the unrighteousness of the Jewish historical experience. It directs a humorous but deep-cutting remark against being outwardly crushed for no good reason, while simultaneously acknowledging the power of humor and the latent hostility and aggressiveness of the humor of the oppressed. Although it might alleviate the pain of tackling the history of pogroms, the humor in this description amplifies the reality of anti-Semitism. Similar targets and strategies shape all of the mock parables. Allen reworks the structure of the Hasidic parable and transforms it into a Jewish joke, thus celebrating the potential of Jewish humor to criticize everyone and everything, including God.

Most of Woody Allen's jokes targeting God blame the divinity for having failed the chosen people. They allow the bitterness stemming from the troubled history of the Jews to surface. The disturbing realities of exile, the precariousness of ghetto life, and the harshness of anti-Semitism are all seen as evidence of God's unfulfilled promise and appear in Woody Allen's short fiction as humor-coated knives that cut deep into the realities they reveal. Even when God keeps his part of the worship bargain, there is still room for reproach. Such is the case in the third fragment of "The Scrolls" in which a tailor, a commandment-

¹⁴⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 208.

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abiding man, is helped by God's suggestion that he sew a small alligator over the pocket of his shirt. In this tale, Allen's satiric energy targets the transactional relationship between the Jews and God: divine help is specifically required as a reward for having obeyed the Ten Commandments. The tale alludes to the impact the Jews had on the textile industry in the United States, ridicules the stereotypical pragmatism of Jewish people, and mocks the notion of Jews' legendary trading skills as a gift from God. Moreover, Allen takes the opportunity to expose the commodity fetishism that shapes the purchasing habits of consumer society, in which the brand (the alligator on the pocket) counts more than quality and functionality. However, even if God's advice has helped his business, the tailor feels compelled to draw attention to the precariousness of human existence: "'The Lord is merciful. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. The problem is, I can't get up.'"¹⁴⁵ This fragment borrows from Psalm 23, the psalm traditionally recited before the third Shabbat meal, in times of distress, and during funeral rituals. The comic effect of the tailor's praise derives from the interplay between the comforting sense of security rooted in the promise of a peaceful afterlife and the incapacitating effects of death. In this case, the bitterly comic final remark – the catalyst for the comic effect of the fragment – extends beyond the ethnic code, encompassing the precariousness of human existence. The bittersweetness of the humor does not stem from the hardships of the ethnic group but from existential anxieties. Biological determinism, the dictatorship of death, the apocalypse complex, the ominously foreshadowed future, and other assorted psychological tribulations are thoroughly explored in Woody Allen's short fiction and form the underlayer of his comic art. In most cases, bitter laughter comes as a consequence of

¹⁴⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 37.

the heightened self-awareness of Allen's comic heroes, as they all show increased sensitivity to a negative metaphysical realm that is the cause of all their anxieties and neuroses.

There is no doubt that Allen's embrace of Jewish humor has sharpened his comic talent. The oral quality of his style, the use of self-criticism, and the strategy of hiding universal sadness and bitterness in a comic register are the main features of his *vis comica*. His predisposition for narratives of failure, the corruption of the sacred and the sublime by the triviality of the mundane in his work, his exuberant imagination and its unexpected, extravagant associations, his integration of the vernacular of Jewish sacred texts into the realm of the profane and frivolous, all tie his work to the Jewish humorous tradition. Using the humorous devices of the Jewish tradition, Allen extends the limits of his comic investigation to encompass the universal. He adds an underlying dourness to his comic art as he concentrates on the exploration of the great philosophical and theological questions that have haunted the human mind since the beginning of time.

3.5. Jewish themes in Woody Allen's fiction

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, scholars who try to define either Jewish or Jewish-American literature, often tackle the importance of specific themes approached by Jewish(-American) writers. The themes they most commonly associate with Jewishness include, but are not limited to, religious aspects manifested either as obedience or rebellion against God, survival and memory, martyrdom and persecution, alienation and marginalization, uprootedness, adaptation, assimilation and acculturation, and the clash between generations. The major counterargument to the thematic definition of Jewish-American

literature is that these themes are common to other communities and traditions, and they cannot be exclusively attributed to Jewishness. Nevertheless, they do reflect the main concerns of the Jewish community and best describe the Jewish experience. Therefore, this sub-section is dedicated to their exploration, as identified in Woody Allen's short fiction.

3.5.1. *Assimilation and maladjustment*

Acculturation and assimilation, either condemned or welcome, perceived as alarming signs of cultural degradation or embraced as survival or evolutionary mechanisms, are some of the most popular themes in the work of Jewish-American writers. The effort toward assimilation is essential to the Jewish experience, and theorists generally agree that "the basic drama of Jewish life involves a desire to 'make it' in the mainstream and to deny or deflect any interpretation of Jews that would pose a barrier"¹⁴⁶. The controversial narrative of assimilation is often thought of as "a representative American Jewish fantasy and one that turns out to involve a much more complex renegotiation of identity than the term *assimilation* generally allows"¹⁴⁷. Writers and artists often confront this aspect of the Jewish experience, especially because literature and cultural products have played an important role in the process itself. As Julian Levinson points out, "[i]f Jews have been seen as not-quite-white or sickly or grotesque, it has fallen to the producers of Jewish culture to sanitize, purify, or 'whiten' Jews"¹⁴⁸. The work of Jewish-American writers often reveals the

¹⁴⁶ Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, 8.

efforts made for reducing differences and neutralizing the perception of cultural discrepancies between the Jewish community and the mainstream. Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth tackle the question of assimilation, either by presenting oppositional attitudes towards the process (in Malamud's *The Assistant*) or by creating metaphors to expose the strategies of coping with the dynamics of the relationship between marginality and mainstream (in Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*).

Woody Allen's major preoccupations do not completely overlap the thematic field charted by theorists, critics, and writers. He does not show a particular interest in the meaning of Jewishness and in defining Jewish identity. He works with the end-product of assimilation and pays less interest to the process itself. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Woody Allen's fictional universe is populated exclusively by Jews and WASPs. As Richard Blake noted, "[f]or Woody Allen, Latinos, Italians, African Americans, or South Asians do not function as adversaries or rivals simply because in his universe they do not exist"¹⁴⁹. New York is, indeed, "the most Jewish city in the world"¹⁵⁰ and, given Woody Allen's Jewish upbringing, the choice to populate his fictional space exclusively with the dominant group and the best-assimilated one testifies to his interest in the dynamics of this relationship. Moreover, the two poles of Woody Allen's New York are Brooklyn and Manhattan which, from a Jewish perspective, can be easily seen as the poles of the world. As Norman Podhoretz points out, for the American Jew, "one of the longest journeys in

¹⁴⁹ Richard A. Blake, *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005, 107.

¹⁵⁰ McCann, *Woody Allen*, 21.

the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan"¹⁵¹. Indeed, the Brooklyn of Woody Allen's childhood is much more traditionally Jewish than the Manhattan of his sophisticated, mature age. This aspect is more prominent in his films, where he plays with the Brooklyn-Manhattan antinomy. While Brooklyn is a territory dominated by the Jewish mother and organized by traditional rules, Manhattan is the place to fall in love with *shiksas*, experience discrimination, and be turned into the butt of jokes on the account of one's own Jewishness. All childhood regressions are depicted in Woody Allen's films in a tragic-comic manner, always emphasizing the supreme power of the overbearing Jewish mother.

The situation of Woody Allen's short stories is slightly different. At times, aspects pertaining to his Jewish cultural legacy do function as the catalyst for the story, though not very often. Although Woody Allen's short fiction is not as concerned with the process of assimilation or the problem of identity, with cultural particularism and marginality as the work of canonized Jewish-American writers, he does tackle these aspects in some of his short stories. For example, in "No Kaddish for Weinstein," he explores the question of ethnic and religious discrimination. As expected, this matter is addressed parodically. When describing the misfortunes of poor Weinstein, Woody Allen writes:

And as if his I.Q. did not isolate him enough, he suffered untold injustices and persecutions because of his religion, mostly from his parents. True, the old man was a member of the synagogue, and his mother, too, but they could never accept that their son was Jewish. "How did it happen?" his father asked, bewildered. My face looks Semitic, Weinstein thought every morning as he shaved.

¹⁵¹ Norman Podhoretz, "Making It." *Writing Our Lives. Autobiographies of American Jews, 1890-1990*. Ed. Steven J. Rubin. New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991. 236-248, 235.

He had been mistaken several times for Robert Redford, but on each occasion it was by a blind person.¹⁵²

Weinstein's troubled relationship with his parents, caused by his religious belonging, invertedly reminds of the scene in *Hannah and Her Sisters* in which Mickey Sachs questions the Jewish religion in front of his parents and tells them that he contemplates becoming a Catholic. Besides creating a humorous effect, the distorted logic of the discrimination presented in "No Kaddish for Weinstein" points toward an interesting aspect of discrimination and anti-Semitism, namely that they come stronger from within the community. The parents, members of the synagogue, incite the feeling of discrimination and marginalization much more than the dominating group. If we take into account the history of the interaction between the waves of Jewish emigrants to the United States and the strong assimilationist impulse given by the already adjusted Jews to the newcomers, Weinstein's tragedy acquires additional meaning. Outside pressure causes Weinstein to question and despise what he is. He becomes the image of the alienated, self-questioning, self-hating Jew. Moreover, the title emphasizes Weinstein's social irrelevance and connects it to his Jewishness. Weinstein is marginalized, unable to cope with the chaotic world he lives in, and when he dies, there will be no one to remember him, no one to say the Kaddish for him.

"No Kaddish for Weinstein" is the only short story in the volumes discussed here that tackles the problems of discrimination and ethnically induced self-hate. In addition, Woody Allen's short fiction also includes other, less elaborated

¹⁵² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 116.

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references and allusions to the perception of Jewishness as otherness. For example, in "Retribution" Woody Allen writes:

She found it hilarious and laughing fetchingly as she filled my glass said, "God, you Jews are truly exotic." Exotic? She should only know the Greenblatts. Or Mr. and Mrs. Milton Sharpstein, my father's friends. Or for that matter, my cousin Tovah. Exotic? I mean, they're nice but hardly exotic with their endless bickering over the best way to combat indigestion or how far back to sit from the television set.¹⁵³

Still, the focus of the short story is on exploring neuroses and romantic relationships, and Woody Allen does not insist upon the outsider's perception of Jewishness. Whenever such an issue appears in his fiction, it is relegated to a secondary position and lacks elaboration.

Woody Allen does not attempt to redefine the identity of the individual on the basis of their belonging to a specific ethnic group, nor is he preoccupied with other major Jewish-American literary themes such as the recuperation of the Yiddishkeit. Apart from the case of Mr. Weinstein, there is no other manifest preoccupation with the meaning of being Jewish in Woody Allen's short fiction. His characters are confronted with a different set of challenges related to coping with an absurd reality, rather than with assimilation or the recuperation of the Jewish tradition. The incapacity of his characters to adjust to the surrounding reality is not to be attributed to his Jewish legacy. This question falls under the realm of existential conundrums, rather than ethnicity. Of course, their inability to adjust can be associated with the unfulfilled desire of the marginalized to merge with the dominant culture. Nevertheless, my contention is that an attempt to understand this literary gesture by using the code of assimilation

¹⁵³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 454.

poses the risk of overinterpretation and deflects the hermeneutic process from its intended outcome. As Mark E. Bleiweiss also points out, with a catch-22 kind of an explanation,

The main source of his alienation, like that of most outsiders, lies in our contemporary social framework and not just in his identity as an ethnic minority. [...] In Allen's world where everyone feels alienated, the only outsider ironically would be those who do not consciously identify as outsiders.¹⁵⁴

Woody Allen's characters are often confronted with the anxiety of exclusion, but this is to be attributed to their existentialist view of the world as a distorted, illogical, absurd place, rather than to ethnic preoccupations. His work is a comical reflection of the struggle to cope with a fundamentally menacing reality, a struggle that has trespassed ethnic boundaries and has become universal.

3.5.2. The troubled Jewish history

Even though identity and assimilation are not as commonly explored in Woody Allen's fiction as in the literary work of other Jewish-American writers, he is still preoccupied with other aspects of the Jewish experience. The governing consciousness of his short stories is easily identifiable as Jewish, and most of Woody Allen's characters draw on stereotypes pertaining to the Jewish tradition. Moreover, there are several short stories that tackle Jewish-specific problems and, even when the exploration of the Jewish experience is not at the center of Woody Allen's texts, Jewish elements are interwoven into the storyline.

¹⁵⁴ Mark E. Bleiweiss, "Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen." *Perspectives on Woody Allen*. Ed. Renée R. Curry. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996. 199-217, 210-11.

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Jewish-American literature often reflects on the issues of history and retentive memory. Undoubtedly, the most traumatic event in recent history is World War II, which brought about iniquitous evil and previously unimaginable atrocities. The Holocaust represents a watershed moment that has caused a major change in the reality of the twentieth century. At first, Jewish writers were unable to address the *Shoah* directly, but, in time, they started revisiting the event by alluding to it, by confronting it directly, or by exploring its consequences and the coping mechanisms of the survivors. These aspects are the central focus of much appreciated novels, and they also enriched the short story genre with texts such as Bernard Malamud's "The Loan", Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl", or Philip Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic".

Woody Allen manifests increased sensitivity to the traumata of the Jewish people. He once confessed that "[y]ou don't have to be Jewish to be traumatized, but it helps"¹⁵⁵. Films such as *Zelig*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and *Shadow and Fog*, all bear references to the emotional damage and the psychological damage caused by the *Shoah*. In *Deconstructing Harry*, the main character, Harry Block, with his complete distrust in the goodness of human nature, articulates one of the cruelest and most powerful forecasts when he says that "[n]ot only do I know that we lost six million – but the scary thing is that records are made to be broken."¹⁵⁶

Woody Allen's short fiction also explores the traumatic legacy of World War II. As mentioned in the sub-section dedicated to the postmodernist revisitation of history, in "The Schmeed Memoirs" Woody Allen refuses to address the tragic event directly

¹⁵⁵ Allen quoted in McCann, *Woody Allen*, 28.

¹⁵⁶ *Deconstructing Harry*. By Woody Allen. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Woody Allen, Judy Davis, Robin Williams. Prod. Jean Doumanian. 1997. Film.

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and chooses to explore World War II by describing the Third Reich from an insider's perspective. He uses harsh satire to translate the entire sequence of events that took place during the war into tonsorial affairs, thus stressing the absurdity of the entire event. Following in the steps of Charlie Chaplin and Mel Brooks, Woody Allen divests the Fuhrer of any trace of dignity, by ridiculing him and representing him as a disturbed, erratic, spoiled brat who is racing Churchill over who gets sideburns first. Woody Allen's concern with getting fictional revenge on the Fuhrer resides in the profound negative feelings he harbors for Hitler. In an interview by Ken Kelley, Woody Allen confessed that Hitler is the first and major target of his hate:

Q: *Is there anybody you really hate?*

A: I hate all the standard villains. Hitler.¹⁵⁷

Woody Allen often alludes to the tumultuous, unfortunate events that have left their mark on the Jewish community throughout history. This praxis allows bitter awareness to surface above the humorous layer of his texts. As Richard Blake noted,

The internal spirit of Judaism, however, is scarcely the material of comedy. While Allen makes cultural Jewishness, the externals, a rich source of his humor, he treats the philosophic and even the theological concerns of Judaism with extreme seriousness, even in his comedies.¹⁵⁸

For example, in "The Scrolls" Woody Allen uses bitter irony to bring into discussion the tragic fate of the Jewish people: "Archaeologists originally set the date of the scrolls at 4000 B.C., or

¹⁵⁷ Woody Allen, *A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen.* 1976. Interview by Ken Kelley. *Woody Allen Interviews.* Ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Katie Coblenitz. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006. 7-28, 27.

¹⁵⁸ Blake, *Profane and Sacred*, 11.

just after the massacre of the Israelites by their benefactors"¹⁵⁹. Jason Kalman argues that, by revisiting and reinterpreting the book of Job in "The Scrolls", Woody Allen "raises important questions for understanding the nature of Jewish belief and theology after the Holocaust"¹⁶⁰. The meaninglessness of Job's suffering (which is neither punishment for sin, nor a means of strengthening Job's faith) becomes an opportunity to expose "the dissonance between traditional belief and the state of the world."¹⁶¹ According to Kalman, Allen's text advances one of the few viable suggestions, "if not an entirely satisfying solution, to how to maintain a relationship with God in the wake of the Holocaust"¹⁶². The idea advanced by Jason Kalman refers to the inversion of positions between God and his subjects. In Kalman's words,

God becomes laughable in his actions as the classic depiction of Him, as omnipotent, omniscient, and just, is thrown out the window but Job, in his protest, becomes heroic. In Allen's retelling, Job behaves the way God should: protesting injustice and acting compassionately [...].¹⁶³

Another allusion to the traumatic fate of the Jewish people, similar to that in "The Scrolls," appears in "Mr. Big". It constitutes the center of the debate between detective Kaiser Lupowitz and Rabbi Itzhak Wiseman, when the former visits the Rabbi in his attempt to literally find God. Woody Allen writes:

"How come you know so much?"

"Because we're the chosen people. He takes best care of us of all His children, which I'd also like to someday discuss with Him."

¹⁵⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 33.

¹⁶⁰ Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 178.

¹⁶¹ Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 178.

¹⁶² Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 178.

¹⁶³ Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 190.

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"What do you pay Him for being chosen?"

"Don't ask."

So that's how it was. The Jews were into God for a lot. It was the old protection racket. Take care of them in return for a price. And from the way Rabbi Wiseman was talking, He soaked them plenty.¹⁶⁴

The series continues with "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar", where Woody Allen describes a Jewish community gathering at the "synagogue to celebrate the sacred Jewish holiday commemorating God's reneging on every promise"¹⁶⁵. In "Mr. Big" and in "Hassidic Tales" the discussion about the troubled history of the Jewish people brings up the transactional nature of worshipping and the likely breach of the protection agreement between God and the chosen people. This constitutes a good enough reason for Woody Allen's wrestling with the image of God as advertised by organized religions.

3.5.3. God, religion, and morality

Whenever Woody Allen alludes to the hardship and victimization of the Jewish people, his finger points at God. As Richard Blake notes, "[f]or Woody Allen, God's simultaneous love for humanity and tolerance for unspeakable evil present a supreme theological mystery, even when he reflects upon it in comic terms"¹⁶⁶. Questioning God's actions, absence, or perceived indifference represents a continuation of a tradition that was born within Hassidic Judaism. Contesting God's ways and putting Him on trial

¹⁶⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 285-286.

¹⁶⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 209.

¹⁶⁶ Blake, *Profane and Sacred*, 12.

for the suffering of His chosen people is not an uncommon practice of Judaism. As Lawrence Epstein points out,

God was sometimes put on trial – especially by Hasidic rabbis in Eastern Europe – for allowing evil to exist in the world and for the travails that had beset the chosen people. Once, during a terrible famine in the Ukraine, the Hasidic rabbis assembled as a Rabbinical Court with God as defendant. The rabbis listened to their leader, who was making the claim against God, and then met to deliberate. Their verdict was that God was guilty.¹⁶⁷

The trial is not necessarily a sign of rebellion, but rather an attempt to humanize the divine and bring it closer to the people. This attitude reflects the sense of familiarity between God and his subjects, cultivated by the Jewish tradition. Moreover, the Jewish holiday of Purim is celebrated with plays and skits that grant their authors the liberty to speak against the most sacred aspects of Judaism; this shows how religion has found an appropriate strategy to accommodate rebellion through the comic. Not even the rabbis, the teachers, or the sacred texts can escape being turned into the subject of ridicule and parody. As Lawrence Epstein explains, “[s]uch a tradition gave carefully demarcated approval to confronting even the most sacred with laughter”¹⁶⁸. Often, the boldness of Hassidic rabbis when confronting God verges on rudeness, but, as Judith Stora-Sandor argues, all the accusations of having abandoned His people, all the invectives and the rage are but signs of the “lover’s quarrel”¹⁶⁹ which, in her opinion, is the phrase that best describes the relationship between the Jews and God.

¹⁶⁷ Lawrence J. Epstein. *The Haunted Smile. The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: Public Affairs, 2001, 289.

¹⁶⁸ Epstein, *The Haunted Smile*, 289.

¹⁶⁹ Stora-Sandor *L’humour juif*, 60. In the original: « Querelle d’amoureux, pourrait-on appeler les rapports du Juif avec son Dieu ».

By assuming the vernacular of Hassidic storytelling in "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar", Woody Allen borrows from the tradition of Hassidic Judaism and exploits it in order to reveal the failings of organized religions. Hassidism is a branch of Judaism, born in the eighteenth century under the guidance of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. Because the principles of Hassidism were said to cultivate superstition and ignorance, it has often been derided by Rabbinic Judaism and of the supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the Haskalah. Hassidic Judaism promotes Jewish mysticism and a panentheistic view of the world, alongside positive, optimistic religious fervor, manifested through singing and dancing, as opposed to legalistic Judaism, to secular studies, and rationalism. Storytelling plays a crucial role in Hassidic education; therefore, Hassidic Judaism has generated vast didactic and hagiographic literature.

Woody Allen's "Hassidic Tales" features six stories, followed by mock commentaries and parodical interpretations that ridicule the *pilpul*¹⁷⁰. In each of them, Woody Allen turns the Rabbis' makeshift remarks into the catalyst of the comic effect, thus sabotaging the architecture of Hassidic storytelling by means of parody. Allen ridicules and downplays the importance of abiding by the Jewish law and respecting all major religious norms: the restrictions of the *kashrut*¹⁷¹, synagogue attendance, or seeking rabbinic advice when under the harrow. The parodical commentaries accompanying each tale mislead the interpretation, by pointing toward superficial hermeneutic paths, such as pride

¹⁷⁰ The *pilpul* is a Talmudic method of reasoning and drawing conclusions, based on spiritual subtlety and keenness.

¹⁷¹ The Jewish dietary tradition.

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and vanity, beauty, or Hebrew law. In "Hassidic Tales" Allen alludes to the imposture of those who teach the sacred texts. Religion becomes just a set of rituals devoid of meaning and performed by impostors. For example, he begins the commentary on the tale about Rabbi Raditz of Poland as follows: "Here the Rabbi is asked to make a value judgment between Moses and Abraham. This is not an easy matter, particularly for a man who has never read the Bible and has been faking it"¹⁷².

Woody Allen exaggerates in order to criticize the discrepancy between the oppressive views of religious ideology and humaneness as he writes: "For this, the Rabbi bashes his head in, which, according to the Torah, is one of the most subtle methods of showing concern"¹⁷³. The same idea resurfaces later in the text:

Certain Orthodox tribes believe suffering is the only way to redeem oneself, and scholars write of a cult called the Essenes, who deliberately went around bumping into walls. God, according to the later books of Moses, is benevolent, although there are still a great many subjects he'd rather not go into.¹⁷⁴

The irony informing the association of divine concern with bashing one's head or atonement with bumping into walls ridicules naïve theodicy and alludes to the shortcomings and corruption of organized religion, that focuses on cultivating a sense of guilt rather than offering a loving and caring image of God. It also points to the troubled history and the suffering of the chosen people, whose fate is supposed to be God's main concern, and emphasizes the contradiction between the definition of a

¹⁷² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 208.

¹⁷³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 208.

¹⁷⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 211.

lovable God and the way in which this love manifests in the life of worshipers. As Laurent Dandrieu argues, for Woody Allen, the prophetic vision of a God who would not interfere with earthly matters out of respect for the free agency of His subjects is unsatisfactory.¹⁷⁵ God's non-interfering policy is unacceptable; it is a rich source of anxiety and existential malaise and constitutes the major premise for the doubt about the existence of a divine being that, above all, is supposed to be protective and loving. The God of Israel, as portrayed by normative religion, fails to offer Woody Allen's characters comfort for their existential anxieties.

As Woody Allen himself admits, mortality and theology are at the center of his work. In an interview by Eric Lax, he confessed that his entire creative effort is underpinned by "an obsession with death, an obsession with God or the lack of God, the question of why are we here"¹⁷⁶. Woody Allen's recurrent, obsessive, almost fanatical preoccupation with the existence or absence of God brings out the ethical and moral dimensions of living in an abandoned world. Ranging from crude, ludicrous aphorisms built on non sequiturs to complex quests and meditation, from agnosticism to atheistic remarks, Woody Allen's quest for God and the doubts it brings along constitute an infinite source of disillusion that continuously fuels the characters' neuroses. As Laurent Dandrieu argues,

If Woody Allen was made in God's image, then the portrait is undoubtedly shaky. But if God is made in Woody Allen's image, then God looks suspiciously like a neurosis. For Woody Allen, things only exist as subjects of neurosis. This is also valid for God

¹⁷⁵ Laurent Dandrieu. *Woody Allen, Portrait d'un antimoderne*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Allen quoted in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, 45.

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himself. Does He exist? The question is insoluble, making it the material of unfathomable and endless anxieties.¹⁷⁷

The logical inconsistencies emerging from the discrepancies between the faith and the fate of the Jews, most often translated into universal dominants that trespass ethnic boundaries and epitomize the experience of mankind, are often situated at the center of Woody Allen's preoccupation; they constitute the drive for his quest for God and meaning. Woody Allen explores the relationship between God and the individual using the logic of mundane empiricism and looking for proof of God's existence in the most insignificant, trivial aspects of quotidian life, in the smallest details of individual experience. His quest is metaphysical, but his methods remain materialistic. A beautiful woman, with well-lined teeth, can become proof of God's existence. In "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists", Vincent van Gogh, going through a postmodern, transworld identity transformation that turned him into a dentist, writes to his brother, Theo:

Theo, she drives me mad! Wild with desire! Her bite! I've never seen such a bite! Her teeth come together perfectly! ... Claire's teeth close and meet! When this happens you know there is a God! And yet she's not too perfect.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Dandrieu, *Woody Allen*, 144. My translation. In the original: « Si Woody Allen a été fait à l'image de Dieu, alors le portrait est sans doute tremblé. Mais si Dieu est à l'image de Woody Allen, alors Dieu ressemble étrangement à une névrose. Pour Woody Allen, les choses n'existent qu'en tant que sujets de névrose. Il en va aussi de Dieu lui-même. Existe-t-il? La question est insoluble, ce qui en fait la matière d'insondable et interminables angoisses. »

¹⁷⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 110.

At the same time, not being able to find the perfect woman can determine the individual to renounce the idea of a loving God. In "The Early Essays" Woody Allen writes a fairly important bracketed note in this respect: "(Actually, the prettiest ones are almost always the most boring, and that is why some people feel there is no God)"¹⁷⁹. The aphorisms at the end of "My Philosophy", which count among Woody Allen's most famous maxims, play on a similar association, in which the trivial belittles the highly metaphysical. Woody Allen writes: "The universe is merely a fleeting idea in God's mind – a pretty uncomfortable thought, particularly if you've just made a down payment on a house"¹⁸⁰. The existence of God is easily contested by the clumsy *schlemiel* who renounces Him, but at the same time, needs Him, both to assuage his doubt and pain and to take care of more pragmatic aspects of life, such as a Swiss bank account.

In "Notes from the Overfed", a text inspired by Dostoevsky's novella "Notes from the Underground" coupled with articles from "Weight Watchers" magazine and touched by a shade of Kafkian influence, Woody Allen challenges God's action as well as the effect of religious doctrines upon people. When asked by his uncle whether he believes in God, Woody Allen's unnamed narrator answers as follows:

"I do not believe in God," I told him. "For if there is a God, then tell me, Uncle, why is there poverty and baldness? Why do some men go through life immune to a thousand mortal enemies of the race, while others get a migraine that lasts for weeks? Why are our days numbered and not, say, lettered? Answer me, Uncle. Or have I shocked you?"¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 173.

¹⁸¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 227.

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In this case, faith and the existence of God are conditioned by and verified through the dialectics between the affliction and scourges of mankind and the immediate, trivial misfortunes of little men. The chain of thought is eventually twisted by comic non sequitur to attenuate the harshness of the accusations and to counterbalance the seriousness of the question. Just as Dostoevsky's novella does, Woody Allen's text tackles suffering, the enjoyment of pain, and alienation. "Notes from the Overfed" is the monologue of an overweight person, whose fingers are fat, whose wrists are fat, whose eyes are fat, and, whose fat, if it could speak, "would probably speak of man's intense loneliness"¹⁸². The narrator explains his condition as a result of religious initiation. He has been introduced to Hassidic pantheism by his uncle who has told him that God was everywhere. Thus, one logical conclusion is that by eating, one can get closer to God:

If God is everywhere, I had concluded, then He is in food. Therefore, the more I ate the godlier I would become. Impelled by this new religious fervor, I glutted myself like a fanatic. In six months, I was the holiest of holies, with a heart entirely devoted to my prayers and a stomach that crossed the state line by itself.¹⁸³

In "Notes from the Overfed" Woody Allen resorts to the strategy of excess to perform a bitter-comic exploration of the man's need to believe and the believer's willingness to transcend his limits and accept suffering as a way of absorbing God. The narrator falls for the tantalizing carrot of religious comfort, only to find himself rambling in delusion and powerless in front of mortality. He concludes the story with an insightful and paradoxical remark, a likely parody of the paradoxes that lie at the heart of religious

¹⁸² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 227.

¹⁸³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 229.

mystery: "For life is change and fat is life, and fat is also death. Don't you see? Fat is everything! Unless, of course, you're overweight."¹⁸⁴

Woody Allen's parody targets organized religions in "Mr. Big" as well. In this case, the metaphysical quest for God receives a strong material dimension and turns into a detective case. Detective Kaiser Lupowitz, hired to find God, begins his search with religion. Even before confronting religious representatives directly, he suspects that they would sooner prevent him from finding God. When Kaiser Lupowitz visits the Rabbi and the Pope, ironies pile atop ironies, and his suspicion about their being unable to help with the quest is confirmed. When asked about the existence and the whereabouts of God, Rabbi Itzhak Wiseman is terrified. He says: "Of course there's a you-know-what, but I'm not even allowed to say His name or He'll strike me dead, which I could never understand why someone is so touchy about having his name said"¹⁸⁵. The Rabbi provided evidence for God's existence, ranging from trivial proofs, such as his being able to buy a great coat for a small price, to the extraordinary stories told by the sacred texts. The Rabbi says: "Hey-what's the Old Testament? Chopped liver? How do you think Moses got the Israelites out of Egypt? With a smile and a tap dance? Believe me, you don't part the Red Sea with some gismo from Korvette's. It takes power"¹⁸⁶. The Rabbi's arguments fail to convince detective Lupowitz because the discussion moves to the hardships of the chosen people, which makes a fairly strong counterargument.

¹⁸⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 229.

¹⁸⁵ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 285.

¹⁸⁶ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 285.

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In his search for answers, detective Lupowitz goes to see Chicago Phil, an "avowed atheist" who, despite not believing in the existence of a supreme being, gives the detective another lead. Chicago Phil tells Kaiser Lupowitz: "The guy never existed, Kaiser. This is the straight dope. It's a big hype. There's no Mr. Big. It's a syndicate. Mostly Sicilian. It's international. But there is no actual head. Except maybe the Pope"¹⁸⁷. The encounter with the Pope is even more illuminating; even if it does not cast any light upon the existence of God, it brings out more clearly the inconsistency and artificiality of organized religions that seem more preoccupied with norms and appearance than with spirituality. The Pope is portrayed as a mobster and the dialogue between him and Kaiser reveals the shallowness and the materialistic concerns of religion:

"Sure He exists, Lupowitz, but I'm the only one that communicates with Him. He speaks only through me."

"Why you, pal?"

"Because I got the red suit."

"This get-up?"

"Don't knock it. Every morning I rise, put on this red suit, and suddenly I'm a big cheese. It's all in the suit. I mean, face it, if I went around in slacks and a sports jacket, I couldn't get arrested religion-wise."

"Then it's a hype. There's no God."

"I don't know. But what's the difference? The money's good."¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, if religion fails, philosophy seems to bring Kaiser Lupowitz closer to the subject of his quest. This narrative turn, hiding an ideological twist not at all surprising for a text written by Woody Allen, curtails the omniscient pretenses, the sweeping totalizations, and monolithic beliefs of religion and

¹⁸⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 286.

¹⁸⁸ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 289.

exposes the shallowness and vulnerability of religious practices and doctrines while emphasizing the profound implication of the critical philosophical thought in theological debates. Lupowitz's sound judgment engages and epitomizes canonical philosophical reflections on the existence, nature, and character of a supreme being, which both develop a philosophically grounded theodicy and promulgate the absence of God. Kaiser Lupowitz recalls:

I had a beer at O'Rourke's and tried to add it all up, but it made no sense at all. Socrates was a suicide – or so they said. Christ was murdered. Nietzsche went nuts. If there was someone out there, He sure as hell didn't want anybody to know it... Could Descartes have been right? Was the universe dualistic? Or did Kant hit it on the head when he postulated the existence of God on moral grounds?¹⁸⁹

The notion that the search for God is a philosophical rather than religious matter is also emphasized in "Spring Bulletin", a parodical description of the students' curriculum. Woody Allen writes: "**PHILOSOPHY XXIX-B: Introduction to God. Confrontation with the Creator of the universe through informal lectures and field trips.**"¹⁹⁰ Still, philosophical assumptions only preempt such a needed discussion, but are far from providing straight answers or unerring solutions.

The ending of "Mr. Big" opens several hermeneutic paths. The detective breaks the case and exposes Ellen Shepherd, a professor of physics at Bryn Mawr, as the murderer of God, because she, with her "pretty little scientific mind, had to have absolute certainty."¹⁹¹ The text can be easily interpreted as a metaphor for the 'death' of the traditional philosophical discourse

¹⁸⁹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 287.

¹⁹⁰ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 201. Bold in the original.

¹⁹¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 290.

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and its being replaced by semantics. Approached from the perspective informed by gender studies, it can be read as the destruction of a patriarchal paradigm. It also lends itself to discussing how science has killed God and has shaken down all philosophical attempts to find answers. However, science is no better at offering a solution to psychological torments. Instead of providing answers, it leads to further questions. In "My Speech to the Graduates" Woody Allen writes:

True, science has taught us how to pasteurize cheese. And true, this can be fun in mixed company-but what of the H-bomb? Have you ever seen what happens when one of those things falls off a desk accidentally? And where is science when one ponders the eternal riddles? How did the cosmos originate? How long has it been around? Did matter begin with an explosion or by the word of God? And if by the latter, could He not have begun it just two weeks earlier to take advantage of some of the warmer weather? Exactly what do we mean when we say, man is mortal? Obviously it's not a compliment.¹⁹²

The key to understanding Woody Allen's view of the relationship between the individual and God is also to be found in "Mr. Big", where the question regarding the existence of God is better nuanced. To that tormenting question, he adds a series of assorted queries such as "what does He look like?" and "where can I find Him?." The following dialogue between Claire Rosensweig and detective Kaiser Lupowitz becomes emblematic for most of Woody Allen's self-reflexive characters:

"What does God look like?"
"I've never seen him."
"Well, how do you know He exists?"
"That's for you to find out."¹⁹³

¹⁹² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 364.

¹⁹³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 285.

Woody Allen's characters, ceaselessly struggling with the vision of a desolating existence under the dictatorship of death, take upon themselves the task of finding out, of looking for answers to these impenetrable questions as a possible way to find relief for the otherwise unbearable awareness of the finitude of the universe. This endeavor moves the imperative need for the existence of divine power and the corrosive disillusionment emerging from all the failed attempts to find God at the center of the drama of Woody Allen's characters. The struggle of his characters is meant to epitomize the crisis of modern man. In Woody Allen's vision, modern man is, by definition, challenged to create his own moral structure in order to fight chaos. As he writes in "My Speech to the Graduates", "[m]odern man is here defined as any person born after Nietzsche's edict that 'God is dead,' but before the hit recording 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand'"¹⁹⁴. Thus, in Woody Allen's opinion, the generations most affected by the awareness of meaninglessness were brought up with the Nietzschean nihilistic legacy; to this, he adds the specific rhetoric of the baby boomers and the Generation Jones¹⁹⁵ that developed in a period of dramatic social and cultural change, which had substantially remodeled society.

The plights and psychological ordeals of Woody Allen's characters epitomize the ongoing changes in the cultural experiences of modern man who witnessed the profound changes

¹⁹⁴ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 363.

¹⁹⁵ The term 'baby boomer' refers to people born after WWII, during a period of great increase in birth rate (1946 to 1964). "Generation Jones" is a term used by Jonathan Pontell to distinguish between the first generation of baby boomers and those born between 1954 and 1965. Woody Allen's mention of the release of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" in 1963 would mark the end of the baby boom period.

in the articulation of the world. In a 1997 interview for *Les Inrockuptibles*, Woody Allen pleads for a rational and realistic, albeit painful, approach to a reality that leaves no room for the grand narratives of the past. In Woody Allen's words,

It is not a disaster, but we must learn to live with the pain. Accept that there is no other way, that all traditional solutions, all philosophies of life with which we grew up are fallacious: psychiatry, religion, Marxism, intellectualism...¹⁹⁶

In the absence of divine power, the open destiny of the individual is diffuse, and human experience becomes insignificant. The effervescence of the quest and the assertiveness of exiling God are, at times, replaced by the bitterness of resignation of the alienated modern man, touched by nostalgia for an impossible naivety and blissful unawareness. In "My Speech to the Graduates" Woody Allen underlines the fundamental disenchantment of the modern man who sunders the myths and symbols of the pre-Nietzschean world:

I often think how comforting life must have been for early man because he believed in a powerful, benevolent Creator who looked after all things. Imagine his disappointment when he saw his wife putting on weight. Contemporary man, of course, has no such peace of mind. He finds himself in the midst of a crisis of faith. He is what we fashionably call "alienated." He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to singles bars.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Woody Allen, «Trop réaliste pour être un génie: Woody Allen », with C. Fevret. Paris: *Les Inrockuptibles*, 5 February 1997. Online. My translation. In the original: «Ce n'est pas un désastre, mais il faut apprendre à vivre avec la douleur. Accepter qu'il n'y a pas d'issue, que toutes les solutions traditionnelles, toutes les philosophies de la vie avec lesquelles nous avons grandi sont non valables: la psychiatrie, la religion, le marxisme, l'intellectualisme...»

¹⁹⁷ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 364-65.

As seen above, Woody Allen's short stories explore the idea of a divine being from various perspectives, ranging from an assiduous quest for a sign of God's existence to contesting religious practices and boldly asserting that divinity is but an empty position. According to Sander Lee, Woody Allen's "love-hate relationship with God" makes his art oscillate between an "intellectual tendency toward atheism" and a "spiritual yearning for some sort of salvation"¹⁹⁸, between a nihilistic vision of the universe as an empty, meaningless place and a bitter nostalgia for an impossible state of spiritual delusion.

The theme of religious coerciveness as insensitive to the individual's needs dominates the jeremiad of that category of Woody Allen's characters that are still looking for God in religion. Of course, their efforts end in disappointment, as could be seen in the case of "Notes from the Overfed". They epitomize the tragic sense of modern life through a crude, disenchanted attitude and develop an apocalypse complex. The psychological mauling of Woody Allen's characters is rooted in the author's own awareness of the malevolence of the universe, since, as Woody Allen confessed:

The empty universe is another item that scares me, along with eternal annihilation, aging, terminal illness and the absence of God in a hostile raging world. I always felt that as long as man is finite he will never truly be relaxed.¹⁹⁹

Although Woody Allen's stories are rich in theological questions, Richard A. Blake argues that Allen enters

... the realm of the sacred on a tourist visa; he remains a citizen of the profane world where such questions fascinate and terrify to

¹⁹⁸ Lee, *Woody Allen's Angst*, 2.

¹⁹⁹ Allen quoted in Kalman, "Heckling the Divine", 186.

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such an extent that they provoke laughter, the nervous giggle of one not quite sure what he will find at the end of the search.²⁰⁰

Nevertheless, Woody Allen's 'nervous giggles' are in no way gratuitous; they coagulate around the imperative of individual responsibility, and his assiduous search fathoms a series of moral and ethical questions. Caught in a potentially godless world and torn apart by the crisis of faith, the modern man is confronted with the challenge to fill the moral vacuum, finding an alternative to divine justice and a mechanism of coping with an indifferent universe. In the absence of an absolute system of values and permanent meaning, morality becomes a lax concept. Thus, in the spirit of existentialism, meaning and morality become exclusively the individual's responsibility.

The exploration of moral relativism gains more complex valence in Woody Allen's films, such as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* or *Match Point*, where he takes this notion to the extreme and explores the moral implications of murder. This particular aspect is also tackled in his short stories. In "The Condemned," a short story about the French Resistance, Cloquet, standing over Gaston Brisseau with a revolver in his hand, ponders whether to kill him. Gaston Brisseau is an "infamous Fascist informer" who "ratted on his friends for the pure sake of it"²⁰¹. Cloquet's effervescent cogitations emphasize the individual's need for absolute justice, accentuate his strong sense of universal responsibility, and reveal the serious affliction caused by the absence of transcendent moral guidance. Woody Allen writes:

By choosing my action, I choose it for all mankind. But what if everyone in the world behaved like me and came here and shot

²⁰⁰ Blake, *Profane and Sacred*, 20.

²⁰¹ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 308.

Brisseau through the ear? What a mess! Not to mention the commotion from the doorbell ringing all night. And of course we'd need valet parking. Ah, God, how the mind boggles when it turns to moral or ethical considerations! Better not to think too much.²⁰²

Although Cloquet decides to spare Brisseau's life and leave, the next morning he is arrested for the murder of Gaston Brisseau. Even though Cloquet is innocent, the evidence found at the crime scene is more than compelling: fingerprints at the scene and on the murder weapon. He is tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death by guillotine. While waiting for his execution, Cloquet continues to ponder on the meaning of life and the existence of God.

"The Condemned" begins in a way that reminds of Camus's *The Stranger* and continues as the fictional illustration of Sartrean existentialism, twisted by the harshness of an unjust reality. Existentialist ethics and individual responsibility are severely punished by the absurdity of life. Fortunately for Cloquet, Woody Allen decides to spare his life by giving the short story a strange, sudden, nonsensical ending in which the real murderer confessed to the crime. Unlike the case of Woody Allen's above-mentioned films, "The Condemned" features an innocent man who is guilty of only contemplating murder. Nevertheless, the murder he has in mind is justified by ideological principles, while the murderers of Woody Allen's films commit murder to remove uncomfortable mistresses from their otherwise comfortable and accomplished lives.

Woody Allen's prose work underlines individual responsibility, which becomes the most powerful force in preventing a potentially godless universe from completely surrendering to a Hobbesian state of nature and transforming into a cesspool. This is well articulated in "My Speech to the

²⁰² Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 310.

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Graduates" where he writes: "Naturally belief in a divine intelligence inspires tranquility. But this does not free us from our human responsibilities."²⁰³ Allen embraces nihilism and refutes the idea of a transcendent being, only to reinforce the imperative of individual moral structure and the responsibility of each individual to manage the dialectic between personal integrity and the principles of pleasure.

In an interview by Eric Lax, Woody Allen defends his work against the accusations of atheism and immorality by stressing the need of the disenchanting modern man to find moral guidance. In a sarcastic defense of his moral stance, Allen points toward organized religions as financially driven organizations that sell illusions. Faith is seen as a denial mechanism and normative religion as a strategy of manipulation. In Woody Allen's words,

People jump at the conclusion that what I'm saying is that anything goes, but actually I'm asking the question: given the worst, how do we carry on, or even why should we choose to carry on? Of course, we don't choose – the choice is hardwired into us. The blood chooses to live. [...] Anyhow, religious people don't want to acknowledge the reality that contradicts their fairy tale. And if it is a godless universe, they're out of business. The cash flow stops.²⁰⁴

Woody Allen also takes the opportunity to promote his plea for a sense of responsibility and morality outside what he sees as the pretentious moralism and the artificial norms of institutional religions. He insists on individual responsibility as the noblest way of managing the morass of immoral human drives, while also admitting to the desolation associated with the lack of transcendent meaning and God:

²⁰³ Allen, *The Complete Prose*, 365.

²⁰⁴ Allen in Eric Lax, *Conversations with Woody Allen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, 124.

If you acknowledge the awful truth of human existence and choose to be a decent human being in the face of it rather than lie to yourself that there's going to be some heavenly reward or some punishment, it seems to me more noble [sic.]. If there is a reward or a punishment or a payoff somehow and you act well, then you're acting well not out of noble motives, the same so-called Christian motives. ... To me it's a damn shame that the universe doesn't have any God or meaning, and yet only when you can accept that can you then go on to lead what these people call a Christian life – that is, a decent, moral life. You can only lead it if you acknowledge what you're up against to begin with and shuck off the fairy tales that lead you to make choices in life that you're making not really for moral reasons but for taking down a big score in the afterlife.²⁰⁵

Most of Woody Allen's exegetes seem to agree that his work is essentially moral. The question of morality shapes up during the quest for God and meaning. It encompasses a series of assorted concerns with regard to the predicaments of modern man, such as the desire to understand the nature of reality, the notion of ultimate justice, the role of spirituality as a guiding principle, or the need to find a coping mechanism for the ominously foreshadowing future that can only lead to extinction. The existential dilemma of Woody Allen's characters springs from the lack of an ontological foundation for ethical and moral values. The awareness of radical ontological freedom continuously nourishes the anxiety of the individual and confines his plight to "the dialectics of hope and despair", but the "[c]onflict between despair and hope can only be resolved on an individual basis, not in any theoretical way"²⁰⁶. Metaphysical despair is slightly attenuated by this solution of individual responsibility and morality, which

²⁰⁵ Allen in Lax, *Conversations*, 124-25.

²⁰⁶ Allen quoted in S. Lee, *Woody Allen's Angst*, 374.

becomes the only viable way of coping with the anguish and emotional vulnerability caused by the apocalypse complex.

In his exploration of the question of divinity and divine justice, Woody Allen cultivates a sense of hostility toward organized religion, and his mutinous attitude is well articulated in his entire work. He militates for a new language of good and evil, which originates in individual responsibility and undermines naïve theodicy. Nevertheless, as pointed out at the beginning of this subchapter, by embracing this position, he does not stand alone within the Jewish tradition. For example, Arthur Miller has never denied the role his Jewish heritage played in his work, but he distanced himself from religious practice and became a self-proclaimed Jewish atheist. Still, the dramatization of the horrors of the Holocaust and the Nazi's pogroms against Jews in plays such as *After the Fall* or *Broken Glass*, together with his exploitation of questions of morality and guilt testify to a strong sense of belonging and community awareness. Philip Roth's characters often repudiate religious norms and rebel against the notion of absolute power. Roth himself declared in an interview that he did not have a religious bone in his body and that the world would be a better place if people stopped believing in God.²⁰⁷ The case of Woody Allen is, however, slightly different. Although he rejects the basic theodicy of punishment and reward, he shows consideration for the individual's need to seek reassurance in a divine being and hope for divine justice. He also seems to put too much energy into looking for signs of God's (non)existence, contesting God's actions, challenging God, blaming God, and even proclaiming God's death to be easily classified as atheist. As his

²⁰⁷ See Philip Roth, *Philip Roth on Fame, Sex, and God*. Interview with Rita Braver. CBS. 3 October 2010. Online. Accessed 12 June 2012.

character Sandy Bates from *Stardust Memories* says, "[t]o you – to you I'm an atheist... to God, I'm the loyal opposition."²⁰⁸ There is a thin line between agnosticism and atheism that Woody Allen does not always seem comfortable crossing. Nevertheless, when it comes to organized religion, he cultivates a strong sense of hostility towards religious pretense, norms, and stricture.

3.6. Final remarks

Woody Allen's ethnic allegiance is a matter of controversy. The declarations made by Woody Allen in various interviews over the years point to his ambivalent attitude towards his Jewish cultural heritage. Moreover, scholarly opinions on Woody Allen's position regarding the ways in which he chooses to process his Jewish legacy range from vehement accusations to sympathetic approaches.

By appealing to a sense of artistic didacticism, Samuel H. Dresner launches a vitriolic attack on Woody Allen's use of his Jewish cultural heritage. Dresner accuses Allen of renouncing and mocking the values of religious tradition and insists on interpreting Woody Allen's art through what he sees as the author's immoral private life conduct. He claims that Woody Allen's films and short fiction represent more than inappropriate examples for the Jewish audience and are very likely to stir anti-Semitic thoughts on the part of a Gentile audience. In Dresner's words,

²⁰⁸ *Stardust Memories*. By Woody Allen. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Woody Allen, Charlotte Rampling and Jessica Harper. Prod. Robert Greenhut. United Artists, 1980. Film.

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Allen projects an ugly picture of the Jew not in some offbeat journal or remote radio program but fleshed out in color and drama on the giant screen for the general public to view. To take but one example, the lusting of the Jew for the Gentile woman. This standard antisemitic canard was part of the devil mythology of the Jew from the Middle-Ages to Hitler's Third Reich, incorporated into centuries of anti-Jewish law. ... Allen is merely poking fun. But the average Gentile reader or viewer may be drawing a more serious lesson. And now Allen apparently confirms all that in real life, as the Mia Farrow, Soon Yi and Dylan incidents may be interpreted.²⁰⁹

As discussed above, Woody Allen's short fiction is extremely sensitive to the misfortunes and traumata associated with the Jewish experience and can hardly be accused of any intentions of stirring anti-Semitic feelings. He does, indeed, operate with Jewish stereotypes and shows a fascination with the exoticism of otherness, but these are commonplace among Jewish-American writers, and the purpose is not the disparagement of the Jewish people.

In *The Trotskys, Freuds, and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture*, Ivan Kalmar comes up with a specific category to explain how Jewish-born personalities relate to their ethnicity. Kalmar speaks of the EJI, "an acronym for Embarrassed Jewish Individuals"²¹⁰, whom he characterizes as "embarrassed about their Jewishness, concerned about living among non-Jews, and trying to deal with the problem by strategies meant to demonstrate that the Jews are NOT unique."²¹¹ The Trotskys, the Freuds, and the Woody Allens

²⁰⁹ Samuel H. Dresner, "Woody Allen and the Jews." *Perspectives on Woody Allen*. Ed. Renée R. Curry. New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996. 188-198, 193.

²¹⁰ Ivan Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds, and Woody Allens: Portrait of a Culture*. Toronto: Viking, 1993, 8.

²¹¹ Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds, and Woody Allens*, 23.

are the three subdivisions of this large category of EJIs. The difference would be that "[t]he 'Woody Allens' are more likely to be loudly eji than the 'Trotskys' or the 'Freuds'" since "[m]any if not most Jewish comics make a living off their ejiness."²¹² Of course, Woody Allen fits this pattern, both because of his universalizing tendencies and because, by tackling Jewish themes in his texts, he indulges in the exploration of the countless nuances of the Jewish self-deprecating humor. This attitude opens his work to accusations of ethnic embarrassment or even self-hatred, but, as Allen himself states in his essay "Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind," this is out of the question:

Now, I have frequently been accused of being a self-hating Jew, and while it's true I am Jewish and I don't like myself very much, it's not because of my persuasion. The reasons lie in totally other areas—like the way I look when I get up in the morning, or that I can never read a road map.²¹³

Mark E. Bleiweiss presents a different perspective on the relationship between Woody Allen's work and his Jewishness. Bleiweiss argues that Woody Allen is so critical of various aspects of the Jewish tradition because he lacks in-depth knowledge about the essential aspects of Jewish life. Bleiweiss explains Woody Allen's attitude as an honest mistake underpinned by good intentions:

Allen's intent is neither to mock his Jewish identity nor even the American-Jewish caricature from which he tries to distinguish himself, even though that caricature shares his shifty, hesitant, and clumsy characteristics. Rather, he increases his persona's warmth by stressing his imperfections. His emphasis on the imperfection, far from mocking Jewish values, actually reflects the Jewish notion

²¹² Kalmar, *The Trotskys, Freuds, and Woody Allens*, 23.

²¹³ Allen, "Random Reflections", 14.

3. Jewish influences on Woody Allen's short fiction

that we must all learn to accept unchangeable shortcomings so that we can function in our everyday lives.²¹⁴

Given Woody Allen's Jewish upbringing, the education he received when he attended the Hebrew School, and that he could speak Yiddish as a child, I would rule out the assumed ignorance invoked by Bleiweiss. Moreover, Woody Allen's ability to absorb and transform the vernacular of the sacred texts and the easiness he shows when tackling aspects pertaining to the Jewish tradition also plead against Bleiweiss' ignorance thesis. On the other hand, I agree that Woody Allen's sharp criticism hides morally instructive purposes, as discussed in the sub-chapter entitled "God, Religion, and Morality".

The relationship between Woody Allen and his Jewishness can be interpreted in various, more or less controversial ways. In some of his statements, he clearly tries to undermine the influence of the Jewish tradition on his work. However, based on the discussion in this chapter, one can safely conclude that Woody Allen's short fiction bears the mark of Jewishness. Indeed, he is not preoccupied with the recuperation of the Yiddishkeit, neither is his writing absorbed by questions of identity and assimilation. Nevertheless, his characters are easily recognizable as Jewish and have been developed out of Jewish stereotypes. The plot of several of his short stories also testifies to the author's ethnic cultural legacy. Moreover, as mentioned above, his attitude towards God and organized religion has much in common with that of other Jewish-American writers who are not religiously observant. Although he launches a serious attack on organized religion and

²¹⁴ Bleiweiss, "Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen", 207.

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often confronts God in ways an agnostic with atheistic tendencies might do, his writing manifests increased sensitivity to the tumultuous history of the Jewish people.

Conclusions

Woody Allen's writing style espoused the aesthetic of *The New Yorker* and what seems to have been love at first sight, turned into a long-term relationship, which began almost half a century ago and still shows its fruitfulness. Seen either as blameful stylistic homogeneity or as creditable aesthetic tradition, the recommendations of *The New Yorker's* fiction editors had a considerable impact on the writing style of the writers who published there over the years and shaped the aesthetic taste of generations of readers. A dedicated contributor, Woody Allen aligns his fiction with the tradition of *The New Yorker* short story. As discussed in the first chapter, Woody Allen's short stories and casuals conscientiously respond to the recommendations of *The New Yorker* fiction editors and contribute to advancing the aesthetics promoted by the magazine. His short fiction is urban par excellence and its humorous qualities are beyond question. It brims over with erudition and catches the atmosphere of metropolitan sophistication encouraged by *The New Yorker*. Woody Allen followed in the steps of his predecessors and, at the same time, contributed to the invigoration and the reinforcement of the spirit of the magazine. He filtered the legacy of Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman through his own artistic sensibility and transformed it into a unique, easily recognizable style.

Within the larger post-war American literary context, Woody Allen's literary work subscribes to the playful aestheticism of postmodernism and would perfectly fit a Procrustean bed forged by the major theorists of postmodernism. In a very Allen-specific manner, he combines postmodernist techniques and existentialism in what comes to be a mark of artistic authenticity. His fiction adopts a deconstructionist attitude, by contesting the value of grand narratives and by attempting to cope with the dubieties, the disillusionment, and the vagaries of post-war realities through the reconstruction of worlds in a new imaginary register governed by the comic-parodic mode, by irony and playfulness, and by an acute sense of the absurd. His fictional worlds are often constructed so as to emphasize the fragility of 'the real' and its replacement by 'the simulated', thus aligning his work to Baudrillard's perspective on the deconstruction of essentialist notions of reality. In Woody Allen's short fiction, metaphysical aspirations surrender to the pragmatism and the materialism of the consumerist society described by Fredric Jameson. Still, Allen does not lose the sense of responsibility to self and authenticity, which are tributary to the existentialist tradition. He even goes one step forward in his engagement with postmodernist attitudes and literary techniques by exposing them in a parody of the second order.

Since Woody Allen's short fiction witnessed the birth, the blooming, and the fading away of postmodernism, it captured both the deconstructive tendencies and the liberating drives of the ethos of postmodernism; it assumed postmodernism's ironic attitude and playful mode. In the process of constructing fictional worlds, Woody Allen relies on the power of postmodernist techniques and strategies to contest the fundamental patterns of coherent space. He builds a world with an implausible map

through juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution, as defined by Brian McHale in his research on postmodernist fiction's representations of space. Woody Allen's penchant for experimenting with spatial representations enables him to convey a strong sense of the absurd, thus exposing the unreliable nature of reality. Woody Allen manipulates the geometry of decentered, fragmented, and overlapped spatial dimensions in order to illustrate the basic existentialist creed of his entire work: reality is absurd, and not even the fictional reinvention of the world can make it meaningful. The challenging of epistemological certainties puts the validity of ultimate truths under thorough scrutiny and exposes them as mere artifacts.

The present is the temporal dominant of Woody Allen's narrative and he works toward reinforcing the notion of a 'perpetual present' as a medium that unifies the essential concerns of human existence; his short fiction revolves around the dialectic of continuity and impermanence. The exploration of the past functions as an ancillary device used to verify and confirm the unreliability of grand discourses, bereft of the power to encompass the promise of ultimate meaning. Even the romantic paradigm of Woody Allen's fiction is shaped by similar skepticism and distrust and is directed toward deconstructing the myth of everlasting, redeeming love.

In the spirit of postmodernism, Woody Allen's short fiction is able to shape-shift and camouflage under a large variety of literary forms in order to expose literary conventions. His texts often come out as hybrids, stylistic *mélanges*, and heteroglotic triumphs of seemingly incompatible discourses. Given the author's ability to master postmodernist literary strategies and reflect the ethos of postmodernism to a great extent, his short fiction can easily serve a didactic purpose.

Still, there is something peculiar about Woody Allen's postmodernist fictional universe and this peculiarity consists of the existence of a centered consciousness to govern it and of a set of thematic strings that bind it into a surprisingly coherent whole. This centered consciousness that dominates Woody Allen's short fiction is protected against postmodern disintegration by the legacy of existentialist philosophy which functions as the essential thematic concern in Woody Allen's texts. The 'Allen self', discussed in the second chapter, evolves horizontally; it develops through experimentation and metamorphosis and assumes different roles and positions as part of the same central quest for meaning. The quest leads to the only viable mitigating solution, which promotes responsibility to the self. Woody Allen's characters have to accept who they are; they are obliged to be themselves and to establish a personal set of moral guidelines. The existence of this governing consciousness, confronted with the same set of existentialist dilemmas from various perspectives, becomes a hallmark of authenticity. The central consciousness of Woody Allen's short fiction reunites the tradition of Benchley's "Little Man," the *schlemiel* figure of the Jewish tradition, and the anti-hero of post-war American literature. Woody Allen blends and continues these traditions and transforms the central consciousness of his literary work into the quintessential New York Jew, the amusing weakling, the clumsy neurotic, caught in his own ceaseless struggle with the absurdity of the universe.

Woody Allen's work often blends postmodernist aesthetic strategies with elements pertaining to his Jewish upbringing. After all, his Jewish legacy plays an essential role in the binding of an otherwise fragmented postmodernist fictional universe. Woody Allen's Jewishness is not religious, but cultural. His existentialist beliefs shape a potentially godless universe and reinforce his

cynical view of religion and religious practice. His refusal of organized religion shows in his uneasy relationship with normative Judaism and is the basis of all ethnic self-hatred accusations that have been cast his way. Although he is fast in rejecting ethnic labels, his writing has been shaped under the influence of the Jewish culture and never ceases to reveal its hybridism. As discussed in the third chapter, Woody Allen shares the sensibilities common to most Jewish-American writers.

As seen in the last chapter of this book, the discussion of the major themes in Woody Allen's short fiction calls for the consideration of his Jewish cultural heritage. Most of his characters draw on Jewish stereotypes and, when he decides to explore family dynamics, the family is always Jewish. He displays a particular sensitivity to the Jewish traumatic history, which could hardly be emulated by any writer who did not feel a strong connection with the Jewish community. Woody Allen's well-known quarrel with God, his rejection of organized religion, as well as the emphasis he places on morality constitute essential themes in his work and bear an ethnic code. Moreover, the most distinctive trait of Woody Allen's entire work, its humorous power, has been shaped under the influences of Jewish humor.

Still, in Woody Allen's short fiction, ethnicity does not serve as a trigger for alienation. He does not dwell much on social and cultural differences, nor on the marginal condition of hyphenated cultures. While in his films the situation is slightly different, in Woody Allen's short fiction ethnicity is not a theme; it simply represents a constituent part of experience. Nevertheless, this attitude only brings him closer to many of his fellow Jewish-American writers, since the tendency of escaping ethnic boundaries through the universalization of the Jewish condition is fairly common among them.

As discussed above, the literary merits of Woody Allen's short fiction help it transcend its label of mere entertainment for intellectuals. Woody Allen's short fiction synthesizes three major influences, three sets of cultural factors, essential for the definition of the twentieth-century American culture: the aesthetic of *The New Yorker*, literary postmodernism, and ethnic writing. While the impact of literary postmodernism can easily withstand the generalization I have just made, the other two sets of factors should also be understood as having an enriching impact on American literature and culture. Although *The New Yorker* was initially meant for the inhabitants of the New York metropolitan area, its wide readership demonstrated that it could not be confined to geographical limits. The sense of elitism and cultural sophistication it promoted also appealed to readers and writers who did not belong to the space the magazine had originally been intended for; therefore, *The New Yorker* can be considered among the forces that have shaped twentieth-century American culture. Moreover, New York set itself up as the world's cultural pole after World War II and became a point of reference for contemporary culture worldwide. Additionally, just as the influences of *The New Yorker* are not limited to a confinable geography, the impact of the Jewish cultural legacy is not restricted to the boundary of a specific ethnic community. The focus on the marginal and the re-evaluation of ethnic cultural legacy has always been on the agenda of postmodernism and, within the context of the "American Kaleidoscope," ethnicity can only contribute to cultural enhancement. Furthermore, Jewish culture has transcended its marginal status through the work of influential writers and artists who made room for its particularities in the mainstream. Therefore, one can safely contend that Woody Allen's short fiction embodies and transforms, in a unique manner, some of the most important forces that have shaped contemporary American culture.

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An original approach to Woody Allen's short fiction, based on a solid theoretical scaffold and good-quality literary hermeneutics.

Mihaela Mudure

Undoubtedly, the main merit of this study is to contribute to a rather neglected field of research. Through the detailed and integrative analysis of texts, by paying attention to the formal, ideological and political contexts of Woody Allen's literary work, Amelia Precup's book contributes to situating his short stories in the American literary canon and opens up future avenues of research.

Petronia Petrar



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